

НОВЫЙ БЫТ



Стел материалной культуры при муее Художественной культуры (Лав-наука), ведя исследовательскую работу в области наскания новых форм, одной из основных своих задач поставила опыты по реорганизации быта.

В основе этой работы — максимум внимания к простоте, к удобству, к экономии. Художник должен органически участвовать в создании новой вещи, а не только пользоваться старыми вещами. Иными словами (Стел) выработал задание, которое должно было подготовить образцы изделий, отопительных приборов, мебели и пр. На характеристики этих образцов он оставил.

Характерные черты данного на рисунке пальто: расширяется несколько расширенная в плечах и талии (корпус) и суженная книзу (форма) — обладает следующими качествами: тепло не выделяется, ткань, материал не обесцвечивается, сохраняет форму, крой, — с одной стороны, удер-живая эти качества, тепло (термин двойной рамки), с другой — создает более гигиеничные условия.

Пальто сделано в таких расчетах, чтобы человек в нем не был бы ни слишком тепло, ни слишком холодно. Это дает возможность, напр., карман, расположенный со стороны спины, рука (рис. 1). Кроме того, пальто имеет две сшитых пришивных подкладки: внутреннюю (осеннюю) и внешнюю (зимнюю), эти прикладки могут быть легко отсоединены от верха (чехла) специальными шнурками.

Ввиду того, что пальто состоит из трех отдельных, по мере необходимости сменяемых, частей, то каждая из них по износу может быть заменена новой.

Костюм сконструирован по тому же принципу в общих чертах: пальто, рукава, куртки и брюки также сужены к низу. Жилет совсем отсутствует. Комбинированный коротышка может быть, достигнуты нужного.

Коричневый цвет — основной, отсутствует. Пальто и костюм выполнены совместно с телью. Теннисная одежда.

На пяти выработанных образцах нормальных печей поясники, указанный на рисунке № 3, печь эта имеет автоматическую топку, обеспечивающую при небольшой затрате дров.

Печь (полн) большой тепловой эффект. Печь снабжена духовкой и большим герметическим шкафом, который сохраняет пищу и пищу горячими в течение 24—30 часов и одновременно при одной топке обогревает помещение, размером 8 кв. м. при 1-ти кв. м. топки до 45 часов, сохраняя температуру от 16° до 14° по Гес-



1—4) Фасон нового типа пальто: 1) пальто с таким расчетом, чтобы человек в нем не стеснялся. Пальто служит в летнее и зимнее — с перемещением одежд. 2) 3-х. Отд. Матер. Культуры — худ. Татлин. 3) Новый тип печи, обеспечивающий большое тепло при небольшой затрате дров. В духовой шкафу пищи сохраняется горячей в течение 24—30 часов.

меру. Помимо этого, разработаны новые конструкции кроватей и др. предметов.

Работа ведется коллективно группой сотрудников, в числе которых входит художник Татлин, являющийся одновременно директором указанного отдела Материальной Культуры.

FIGURE 2.1

Vladimir Tatlin, designs for clothing and a stove, illustrated in the article "The New Everyday Life."

Krasnaya panorama no. 23 (1924).



CHAPTER 2

EVERYDAY OBJECTS

In November 1920, the Russian avant-garde artist Vladimir Tatlin was photographed with the wooden model of his *Monument to the Third International*. Projected to spiral almost half a kilometer into the sky, the monument would span the width of the Neva river in Petrograd; the outer latticework frame would be built of iron, while on the inside, four giant buildings made of glass would hang suspended above the river, each rotating at a different speed. Four years later, in December 1924, Tatlin again had himself photographed with his work—this time, an overcoat, a practical men's suit, pattern pieces, and a wood-burning stove, all prototypes for industrial mass production—which illustrated a brief article in the popular magazine *Krasnaia panorama* (Red Panorama) under the boldface title “The New Everyday Life” (*Novyi byt*; figure 2.1).¹ The towering, tilted, open-framework spiral forms of the monument (figure 2.2) have given way, in the intervening four years, to the heavy, rooted boxlike shape of the undecorated and human-scale tile stove. The two photographs also present vastly different versions of the convention of “the artist with his work”: Tatlin the leader of the left avant-garde, casually posed at the base of his spectacular tower in proletarian jacket and cap, pipe in hand, has given way to these stiff, even dour photographs of Tatlin the Constructivist, modeling his sensible overcoat and practical suit.

In a statement issued about his *Monument* in late 1920, Tatlin had famously declared “Distrusting the eye, we place it under the control of touch,”² yet this declaration seems to apply at least as much to the everyday material objects he would go on to make in 1923–1924. The declaration also forms an instructive counterpoint to Aleksandr Rodchenko's assertion during the debates on

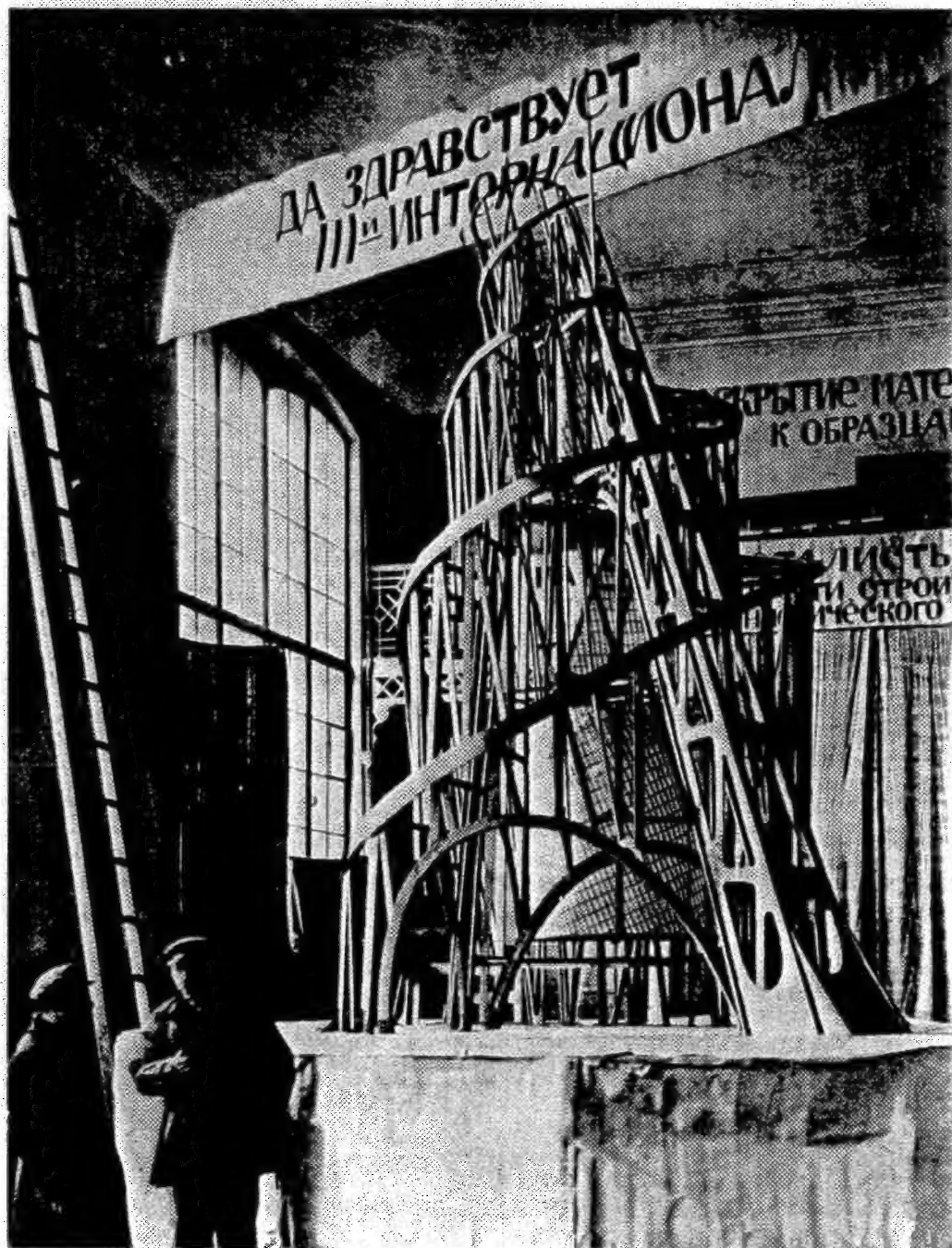


FIGURE 2.2

Vladimir Tatlin with his *Monument to the Third International*, 1920.

Productivism at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (INKHUK) that artists are different from engineers because “we know how to see.”³ The single-minded intensity of Tatlin’s choice to emphasize touch over vision, material over visual, represents one of the most dramatic shifts in an individual artist’s practice in the history of the avant-garde. The critic Abram Efros mustered the requisite pathos in pronouncing the standard negative assessment of this shift in 1924: “I regret that Tatlin descended into Constructivism, his talent is so great and so necessary—I regret that he is inventing and building economical stoves. . . . art is unhappy, it still remembers Tatlin the artist, it could still regard as its own Tatlin the builder, the fantastic architect of the Tower of the Third International.”⁴ Even within the history of Russian Constructivism, Tatlin’s “descent” is one of the most absolute shifts from making visual art to making plain utilitarian objects. His everyday objects are therefore the necessary place to begin the story of the Constructivist socialist object even if they will not be the best place to end it, because they attempt to deny rather than engage with the object desires of modernity.

Although he was recognized as the “father of Constructivism”—born in 1885, he was six years older than Rodchenko and about fifteen years older than the youngest student members of the Constructivist group formed at INKHUK in 1921—Tatlin never called himself a Constructivist, and referred to his own practice as the “culture of materials” to distinguish it from that of the INKHUK Constructivists.⁵ During the period of the INKHUK debates in Moscow, Tatlin was teaching in Petrograd, but he was a “corresponding member” of the Institute and occasionally attended meetings. At a meeting in December 1921, even though one of the younger Constructivists attacked him personally, criticizing the “utopianism” of his *Monument*, Tatlin came out in accord with the Productivist program of utilitarian, industrial production. “Life compels us to make new things,” he said. “We must unite and work together.”⁶ He began “working together” with a group of artists to make “new things” in 1922 at his studio, the Section for Material Culture, which was part of the State Institute of Artistic Culture (INKHUK) in Petrograd. The Tatlin scholar Larissa Zhadova notes that although Tatlin always identified himself as the director of the Section and signed his reports on its work “on behalf of the Group for Material Culture,” this seeming individualism was not in conflict with his own conception of the individual in relation to the collective as he had expressed it in a 1919 statement: “The initiative individual is the refraction point of the collective’s creativity and brings realization to the idea.”⁷ The “New Everyday Life” article in *Krasnaia panorama*, though dominated by the two large illustrations of Tatlin himself, speaks anonymously of the work of the Section,

mentioning Tatlin's name only in the final paragraph: "The work is carried out collectively by a group of co-workers whose numbers include the artist Tatlin, who is at the same time also the director."⁸ In 1924, then, Tatlin presents himself as a collective worker creating the most basic material objects for use in everyday life; as the opening lines of the article put it, the work of the Section experiments with "the reorganization of everyday life" and is based on "calling maximum attention to the simplest things that surround us."

In its emphasis on "the simplest things that surround us," Tatlin's art-into-life project defies the commodity aesthetics and consumer desires that flourished again in revolutionary Russia during the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP). For Tatlin, the everyday life of noncapitalist modernity would be simple and functional. Industrial production would be appropriately altered—by advanced artists like himself—to meet the most pressing daily needs of the masses, rather than to cater to their errant desires. He set up this contrast in the bluntest of terms in a photomontage that he made on the basis of the "New Everyday Life" article shortly after its publication in December 1924, which was likely displayed in the "exhibition room" of the Section for Material Culture (figure 2.3).⁹ The lower section of the photomontage incorporates an additional photograph of Tatlin modeling his design for a men's sportswear suit, pasted above and partially obscuring two horizontal images of gentlemen wearing fashionable suits—the upper one distinctly old-fashioned, the lower one more contemporary—cut out of magazines. The earnest contrast between the images of Tatlin and the gentlemen is amplified by the scribbled texts in Tatlin's own hand. On the right, the handwritten lines connected to his picture with an emphatic straight-lined arrow assert the vehement need-based practicality of his sportswear suit: "This clothing is made with the advantage of being warm, not restricting movement, being hygienic and lasting longer." A scrawled curving arrow connects the reproachful text on the left to the fashionable gentlemen: "This clothing restricts movement, is unhygienic, and they wear it only because they consider it—beautiful." The misguided men who covet clothing merely for its beauty represent the old, capitalist way of life, now resurgent in the period of NEP. The cut-and-paste technique of the photomontage asserts that Tatlin's "material culture" will literally eclipse these men and their aesthetic consumer desires, replacing them with consumers who want only simple, unadorned things that fulfill human needs.

Tatlin's particular version of the "socialist object" therefore counters Peter Bürger's worry, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, that the art-into-life strategies of the avant-garde courted a collapse of art into the "commodity aesthetics" of mass



FIGURE 2.3

Vladimir Tatlin, montage incorporating the article "The New Everyday Life," 1924-1925.
Cut-and-pasted printed papers, photographs, india ink, and pencil on paper. See plate 1.

culture.¹⁰ Although Tatlin designed his objects to be mass produced, his vision of socialist modernity included industrial production and technology but excluded the commercialized mass culture of capitalism. Yet in their material literalness and emphatic utility his objects threaten to enact a different collapse of the work of art into the mute artifacts of everyday life. They attempt to deny all visual qualities—not only “beauty”—in favor of material qualities of primitive utility such as hygiene and warmth. By purporting to address only consumer need, and not consumer desire, within socialist modernity, they diverge from this book’s definition of the socialist object. At the same time, however, they are socialist objects in the sense that Tatlin clearly construed them as active and emotionally affective: his language of affection for his everyday objects, as they heroically beat down capitalist commodities, demonstrates that they function as “comrades” and “coworkers” in his fight against the old everyday life. This chapter will argue that Tatlin’s stunning shift from making ambitious art to making stoves and boxy suits should not be understood as a moment of descent or loss for the avant-garde, but as a conscious invention of an active material object through which the modernist principle of “truth to materials”—the will of the medium or the material itself determining artistic form—takes on a social agency.

Tatlin’s Primitivisms

Tatlin was well aware of the contradiction between the primitive technology of his wood-burning stove and the advanced technological ambitions of Constructivism: “The time for ‘Americanized’ stoves in the conditions of our Russian everyday life [byt] has not yet arrived,” he told the art historian and critic Nikolai Punin. “We need things as simple and primitive as our simple and primitive everyday life.”¹¹ *Amerikanizm* was a buzzword for modernity in early Soviet Russia, with strong positive connotations of advanced industrial technology and inventiveness as well as the obvious negative ones, from a Bolshevik perspective, of capitalist excess. Tatlin is wistful that Russia is not yet ready for the Americanized stoves, just as the Russian economy and engineering resources had been nowhere near adequate for actually building the technological marvel of his proposed *Monument to the Third International*. There were barely enough nails to be found in Petrograd, so the well-known story goes, to build the wooden model of it. But he is also realistic to the point of pessimism: by 1924, more completely than his Constructivist colleagues, he has shed the unrealistic industrial enthusiasm that so gripped the INKHUK Productivists during the years of War Communism. If they understood their dream of the artist-constructor working in socialist industry as being challenged

primarily by the demands of the consumerist NEP economy, Tatlin saw the challenge as stemming from the other side: from Russia's historically backward, agrarian economy. He directed his utilitarian objects toward feasibly improving the deeply traditional, outmoded practices of everyday life experienced by the majority of proletarians and peasants, rather than at sustaining the tenuously more modern life experienced by certain classes of urban dwellers, like the Nepmen and members of the intelligentsia, in Leningrad and Moscow.

Tatlin's commitment to "our simple and primitive everyday life" in 1924 significantly recasts the notion of the "primitive" as it functioned in the neoprimitivist movement through which he first entered the prerevolutionary avant-garde around 1911.¹² The neoprimitivist painter Natalia Goncharova promoted Russian peasant subject matter as most appropriate for modern Russian painting, even claiming that native Russian forms such as Scythian statuettes and the wooden dolls of craft fairs had invented cubism long before the Parisians.¹³ She and the painter Mikhail Larionov, with both of whom Tatlin was closely allied in the early 1910s, mined native Russian art forms for their flattened formal qualities and their pictorial immediacy: the folk art traditions of the flat, colorful *lubki* (woodcuts), patterned shawls, and wooden dolls; the curvilinear forms and shimmering colors of icons; the bright, flattened figuration of commercial shop signs; and, in the case of Larionov, the crude graffiti of Russian army barracks.¹⁴ One of Tatlin's first major exhibitions of his work, at the avant-garde Donkey's Tail (*Osliny khvost*) exhibition in Moscow in March 1912, included the paintings *Fishmonger* and *Sailor (Self-Portrait)* (figure 2.4), both from 1911, in keeping with the exhibition's theme of "scenes from folk life."

In *Sailor (Self-Portrait)*, Tatlin presents himself in sailor's uniform, recalling his work as a ship's boy in his early teenage years, when he ran away from home and sailed to Bulgaria and Turkey, and his summer work, while attending the art college in Penza in his early twenties, as a professional sailor of ships on the Mediterranean. The painting refers to the pictorial tradition of the *lubok* in its use of opaque areas of a limited palette of blue, gold, and black paint, and in the dramatically contrasting scale of the two tiny, flattened figures framing Tatlin's head, their distance from him signified only by their difference in size, not by the more sophisticated techniques of painterly realism. Even more obviously the painting evokes the icon tradition, in the triangular shape of the face, the stylized curve of brow into nose, the gracefully curving silhouettes of the two small figures, and the gold color and striking white highlights of the face. Tatlin's self-portrait deftly collapses the lower-class masculine image of the sailor, dashing but



FIGURE 2.4
Vladimir Tatlin, *Sailor (Self-Portrait)*, 1911. Tempera on canvas. Courtesy State Russian Museum,
St. Petersburg. See plate 2.

uneducated, with the otherworldly intensity of icon portraits of the saints, to create an arrestingly hybrid image of himself as modern Russian artist. In this model of primitivism, the appropriated native or folk forms themselves signify as inherently modern in the colorful immediacy of their simplified, even crude visual language, promising unmediated access to the authenticity or pleasure or spirituality offered by the subject matter.

Tatlin soon followed a singular path out of this folk primitivism, however, narrowing his focus by 1913 to one strand of the Russian native tradition, namely icons, and by 1915 vociferously disassociating himself from all avant-garde "isms."¹⁵ What so attracted Tatlin's attention in the icon tradition was less its primitiveness than its unique materiality: icon paintings were often highlighted with bright white paint—the technique he used in *Sailor*—as well as gilt, surrounded by elaborate frames made from valuable metals and encrusted with precious stones, metal halos, and even protective metal casings that were opened only on holy occasions.¹⁶ But instead of the precious or ritualized materials of the icon, Tatlin assembled his three-dimensional constructions of the mid-1910s that he called "painterly reliefs" (*Zhivopisnye rel'efy*) and "selections of materials" (*Podbory materialov*) from the detritus of the modern, semi-industrialized city streets. For example, a work like his *Painterly Relief 1915* (figure 2.5), now lost, was made from wood, plaster, tar, glass, and sheet metal. In spite of Goncharova's colorful claim that Russian folk art had invented Cubism long before the French, the relief's jutting forms, framed on the wall in the vertical format of a painting, speak strongly of its debt to the Cubist sculptural collage of Picasso, to whose studio in Paris Tatlin had made a revelatory pilgrimage in the spring of 1914. But if Picasso's Cubist constructions continued to refer to the familiar lexicon of Cubist objects such as guitars and bottles, in order to interrogate the arbitrary nature of the sign in the Western tradition of illusionistic painting, Tatlin's reliefs took as their subject the properties of material itself—the concave curl of glass, the reach of rusted metal.¹⁷

His reliefs can be characterized as investigations of *faktura*, a fundamental concept of Russian avant-garde art in the early 1910s referring to the way in which a work of art is made, its constitutive materiality. In her detailed account of the term, Maria Gough defines one of the key principles of *faktura* as "materiological determination." Tatlin, she writes, "sought to foster the volition of the material" rather than express his individual artistic will; "reconfiguring himself as the material's assistant, Tatlin thereby partially effaced his own presence within the work."¹⁸ If neoprimitivism had provided a modernist pictorial language for

Tatlin's densely layered self-portrait in *Sailor*, his painterly reliefs participate in a markedly different strand of the modernist project: the attempt to erase artistic will or authorial identity from the work of art in favor of allowing the will of the medium itself to emerge.¹⁹

Tatlin's effacement of himself from the sculptural work was only a fiction, of course: as Gough also points out, it was Tatlin's subjective act of composition that allowed the assembled materials to find their appropriate form. His artistic choice is evident in the strongly centered, geometric composition of *Painterly Relief* 1915, as well as in the dramatic sweep of the sheets of metal that make up his *Corner Counter-Relief* (*Uglovoi kontr-rel'ef*) of 1915 (figure 2.6). In this lost work, sculpture has vaulted from its usual pedestal on the floor to hang suspended in the air, an angular massing of industrial materials supported by cables that are literally attached to, and dependent on, the corner walls of the room. The "materiological determination" of the work is evident in its investigative, quasi-engineering premise: it tests the weight-bearing capacities of tin and aluminum, as well as the tensile strength of their supporting wires. But at the same time, because the materials do not have to perform any actual function, Tatlin could have assembled them in any number of ways; the work therefore also represents his own compositional choice.

In Gough's analysis, the demand for utilitarian function made by the Constructivist program of 1921 effected the transformation of the meaning of *faktura* from an anti-authorial "materiological determination" to a more conventional functionalism. The political and practical ambitions of the Constructivist program meant that material would no longer determine form, but would become "the instrument" of such external ambitions as the expression of Communist ideology and the fulfillment of a given utilitarian function: "*Faktura* as a principle of materiological determination (form follows material) was replaced by a nascent functionalism (form follows function)."²⁰ Once form had to follow an external, practical function, it would be determined by the needs of this everyday function, and not by the spirit of the artist as a worker of material. With this functionalism, she continues, the Constructivists retreated from the modernist attack on artistic subjectivity represented by Tatlin's notion of the material itself as generative of artistic form, and opted instead for reinserting the will of the maker in shaping material toward a given external function, in the process leaving art behind entirely in favor of utility.

Gough's text on *Faktura* does not address Tatlin's own later work with utilitarian objects; it contrasts his early reliefs of the 1910s with the later declarations



FIGURE 2.5

Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief* 1915, 1915.

Wood, plaster, tar, glass, sheet metal. No longer extant.

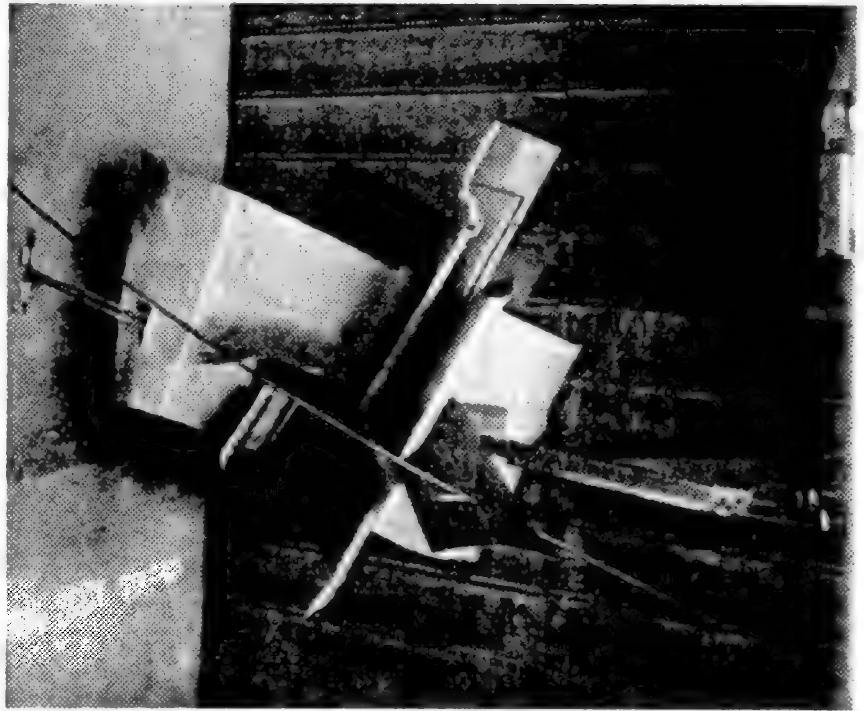


FIGURE 2.6

Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief no. 133*, 1915. Aluminum and tin sheeting, oil pigment, priming paint, wire, fastening components. No longer extant.

of utilitarianism by Constructivists like Rodchenko and Gan. Analysis of actual utilitarian objects falls outside its scope. It is the argument of this book that detailed critical attention to Constructivist utilitarian objects, including the everyday objects that Tatlin would go on to make in the 1920s, demonstrates that they do not consistently warrant the label of an instrumentalized functionalism. If we examine Tatlin's everyday objects using Gough's helpful notion of "materiological determination," we find that Tatlin did not simply abandon his radical notion of material itself as generative of form. The "volition of the material" and the effacement of the author were maintained, but now in the service not only of artistic experimentation, but of transforming everyday life in socialist Russia.

The everyday objects, in their resolute plainness, seem to insist on the effacement of the author, just as the text of the "New Everyday Life" article downplays Tatlin's leading role in the Section for Material Culture. Tatlin suggests that this effacement is due to the demands of "our simple and primitive everyday life," which do not allow for such individual flourishes as, for example, the technological pyrotechnics of *amerikanizm*. By assigning the explanation for his objects' form to "everyday life" (*byt*), however, Tatlin is offering not a functional

explanation but a material one: in Russian language and culture, *byt* has deep ties to materiality. In his everyday objects, then, it will be possible to trace an alternative version of the "volition of the material," in which the materiality of everyday life determines form in a way that is not external to the material, as in functionalism, but intrinsic to it. These objects are Tatlin's contribution to the Constructivist recasting of the key notion of *tselesoobraznost'* (expediency, or, more precisely, "formed in relation to a goal") as a broader psychological and historical principle of the socialist object. The visual anonymity of Tatlin's "primitive" everyday objects therefore connects with, rather than "descends" from, the antisubjective achievement of his avant-garde reliefs.

If neoprimitivism had involved an interest in ethnographic research into folk objects and customs, Tatlin's primitive objects of 1924 were also the result of research into the customs of everyday life, albeit in a less exoticizing form. In one of the reports he submitted in November 1924 on the work conducted by his Section for Material Culture, he listed as one of the Section's three main tasks "Research into everyday life as a certain form of material culture."²¹ For Tatlin, then, "everyday life" was not a static category—which, as we shall see, it had been historically in Russia—but one that promised, if properly researched and understood, to inspire new forms in the objects produced by his Section. He conceptualized this research as the logical extension of his earlier investigations of material in his reliefs; as he wrote in another report around the same time, the Section's objective was "to use the accumulated experience on material culture (relief and counter-relief), and apply these experiments to the organization of everyday life, taking mass production into account."²² Although we do not have a record of the exact nature of the Section's research into everyday life, the objects themselves reveal what Tatlin learned about contemporary Russian *byt* in his research.

"So what kind of life has been predicted by Tatlin and what kind of art does it need?" asked the critic Punin, Tatlin's loyal defender even in the face of his switch from avant-garde experimentation to primitive utilitarian objects. "Tatlin's answer to this fundamental question," Punin admits, "was a stove. Such an answer meant above all that the artist's attention is focused with particular fixity on what is usually called *byt*, not on its higher levels, on that which exceeds it, i.e., on that which somehow originates in *byt* and serves as its elevation and decoration, but on its lower levels of daily human needs."²³ Tatlin would meet these "lower levels" of need with efficient stoves for workers' apartments, patterns for mass-produced hygienic clothing, and formulas for better kinds of utilitarian paints developed in

the Section's "Division of Coating Materials," as well as designs for beds, pots, and dishes. Tatlin's "particular fixity" of attention to *byt* challenged the most fundamental categories of Russian culture, in which *byt* was always a category to be transcended—in Punin's terms, to be exceeded and elevated. In his attention to the "low" of everyday life, Tatlin invented a form of artistic primitivism that risked his avant-garde identity far more radically than other modern art movements that have come under the primitivist label.

Bolshevism and *Byt*: Can "Everyday Life" Ever Be "New"?

The question of *byt* in relation to Bolshevism first entered seriously into public discussion in 1923 with the publication of Leon Trotsky's essays on the subject in the party newspaper *Pravda*, collected that same year in his book *Questions of Everyday Life*.²⁴ It was unprecedented in the Russian intellectual tradition for an author to devote an entire book to theorizing the political significance of everyday life. In premodern Russian, the word *byt* was a neutral term meaning "way of life" or "everyday life," derived from the verb *byvat'*, meaning "to happen, to take place, to be present." The more negative meaning of *byt* as the petty, repetitive daily experience that is the opposite of *bytie*, "spiritually meaningful existence," accrued to the word only in the later nineteenth century.²⁵ In her history of the meaning of *byt* in Russian culture, Svetlana Boym has argued convincingly that the fundamental distinction in Russian culture is not private versus public, as in the West, but material versus spiritual.²⁶ In the Russian philosophical opposition between *byt* and *bytie*, the goal was to transcend material *byt* in favor of spiritual *bytie*. In this striving for transcendence, Boym proposes that "*byt* is perceived not simply as unspiritual but also as non-Russian in the higher, poetic sense of what it means to be Russian."²⁷ This poetic urge toward transcendence also motivated Russian revolutionaries; in their case, however, the transcendence was ideological rather than spiritual, with the goal of collective happiness in a Communist future in this world. The Marxist materialism of the revolutionaries—the philosophical belief that economic existence determines social consciousness—did not exempt them from the traditional Russian contempt for the material side of life, that is to say, for *byt*. In the nineteenth century, Boym writes, "Westernizers and Slavophiles, Romantics and modernists, aesthetic and political utopians, and Bolsheviks and monarchists all engaged in battles with *byt*. For many of them what mattered was not physical survival but sacrifice, not preservation of life but its complete transcendence, not the fragile human existence in this world but collective happiness in the other world."²⁸

Trotsky's 1923 articles inaugurated an explosion of public debate about the prospect of a higher form of a "new everyday life" under socialism. The phrase *novyi byt* had cropped up regularly in the utopian atmosphere of the civil war years, loosely signifying a range of ideas from simple strategies for the modernization of backward peasant life to radical collective living arrangements, but these ideas had not occupied official party attention. The party's sudden interest in *byt* in 1923 represented, most broadly, a sense that the New Economic Policy had brought about a breathing spell after the upheaval of the civil war, allowing the new government to turn its attention from seizing power to questions of culture and social life. It also signaled the leaders' worry that the return to a semblance of normality under NEP would result in a bourgeois influence on morality, sexuality, and domestic life. The party responded by engaging more directly in formulating ideas of appropriate habits of daily life under Communism.²⁹ In the foreword to *Questions of Everyday Life*, Trotsky writes that the idea for his topic came to him from a series of long, impassioned meetings he had with a group of "mass agitators" (*agitatory-massoviki*) from the Moscow Party Committee, during which the participants revealed that their most pressing questions concerned family life and *byt* (VB, pp. 3-4). Throughout his essays, he refers to examples from the lives of these earnest party activists and their uncertainty about the correct form of *byt* for a communist.

In Trotsky's account, *byt* is no longer petty or banal, but a primitive, atavistic force that can undermine the forward movement of the revolution. His essay "In Order to Reconstruct Byt, We Must First Come to Know It" characterizes the conservative aspects of *byt* in Marxist terms:

In questions of *byt* more than anywhere else, the extent to which the individual person is the product rather than the creator of his conditions becomes clear. Byt, i.e. the environment and practice of life, even more than economics hides itself "behind people's backs" (to use Marx's expression). Conscious creation in the area of *byt* has had an insignificant place in human history. Byt accumulates through people's spontaneous experience, it changes spontaneously. . . and thus it expresses much more the past of human society than its present. (VB, p. 25)

Because it operates behind people's backs "spontaneously"—a term Trotsky uses in the negative Marxist sense of something unrecognized or untheorized—*byt* is a passive force that opposes the conscious creation of new forms of social life,

tenaciously preserving a connection to the past of human history. Trotsky continues by reminding his readers that the small proletarian class in Russia has not existed for generations, but has only in the past decades emerged from the poverty and backwardness of the peasantry, specifically tying the everyday life of the contemporary Russian proletariat to a more primitive time. In its material weight, *byt* becomes a literal physical burden that prevents the elevation of proletarian consciousness into socialist modernity.

The crude practices and material objects of traditional village *byt* had been well documented in prerevolutionary ethnography, the only scholarly field that had seriously analyzed *byt*. But ethnographers studied *byt* in the sense of researching the "folk ways" of various groups who were securely "other" to themselves: the peoples of the non-Russian provinces, the peasants of various regions, and the emerging class of industrial workers. By analyzing the significance of the everyday lives of the Soviet proletariat and of party members themselves, Trotsky metaphorically turned this "ethnographic gaze" directly on the "self" of the Bolsheviks, discovering a backwardness that would sabotage revolutionary efforts to construct a new life if it was not investigated and combated.³⁰ In response to this demand for information on the actual, still largely regressive conditions in which early Soviet industrial workers lived, the newly revamped and Marxist field of the ethnography of the everyday life of workers (*rabochii byt*) intensified its research in the early 1920s.

An indefatigable ethnographer on the staff of the State Russian Museum in Leningrad, for example, E. Medvedev, documented the domestic material lives of Leningrad workers in 1924-1925, leaving files full of meticulously labeled photographs in the photographic collection of the Historical-Everyday Section (*Istoriko-bytovoi otdel*) of the museum.³¹ A photograph from Medvedev's research, showing a Leningrad worker's family eating dinner together in 1925, vividly demonstrates the causes for Trotsky's fear of the underhanded effects of traditional peasant *byt* on the Soviet working class (figure 2.7).³² The worker is Vasilii Trofimovich Smirnov, a riveter at the Nevskii Shipbuilding Factory in Leningrad. This skilled position in heavy industry placed him in the elite of the small Soviet working class. The caption notes that Smirnov's family and visitors from the countryside are eating with him. At first glance this might seem to be an innocuous image of a family dinner, albeit one that openly acknowledges the material poverty of even elite workers in its depiction of the meager meal and the newspapers used as wallpaper. But a viewer like Trotsky would immediately notice that the family members are all eating soup from the same big bowl, just

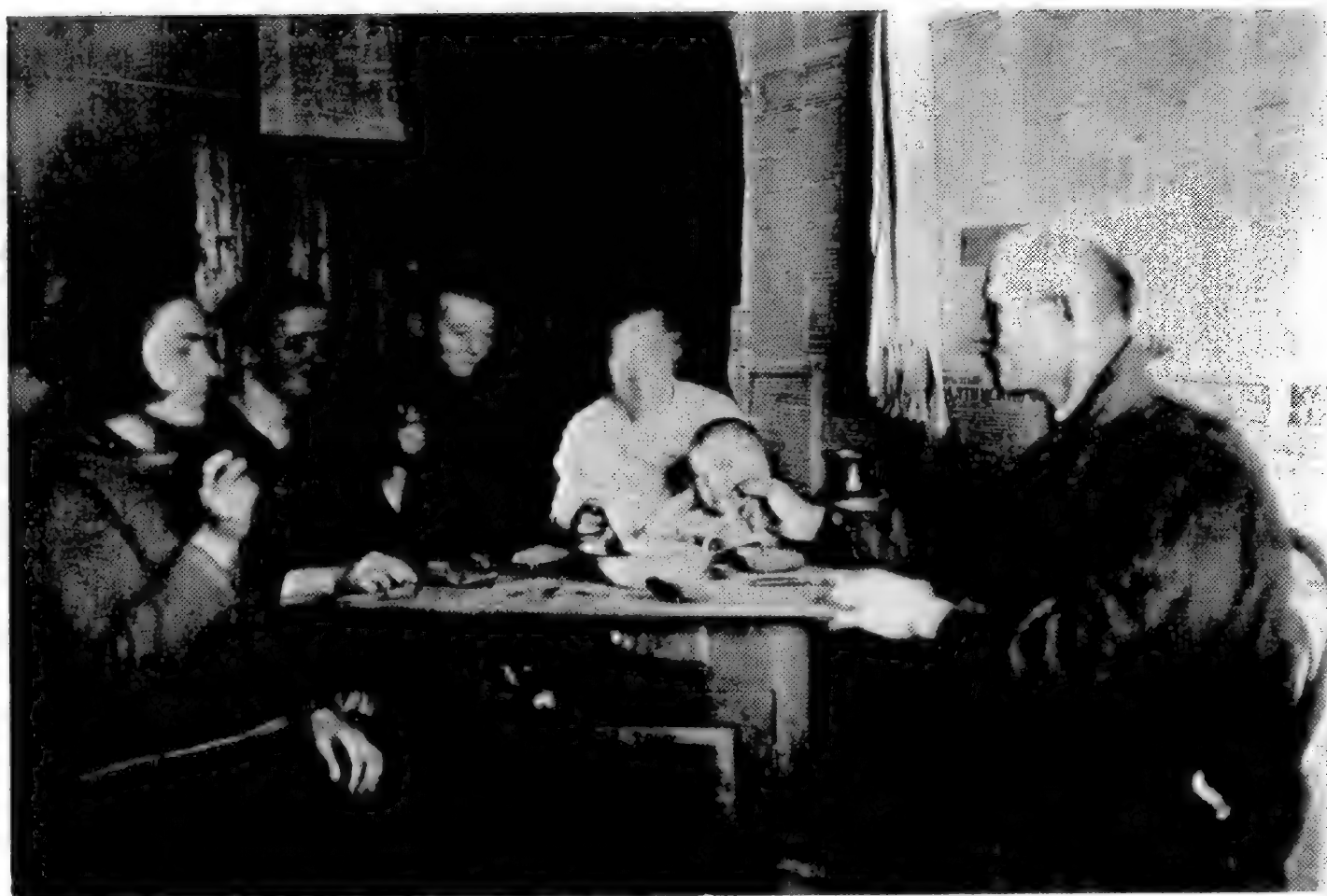


FIGURE 2.7

A worker from the Nevskii Shipbuilding Factory with his family at dinner, Leningrad, 1925. Courtesy Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg

as peasants had always eaten in the countryside—a practice that spread syphilis and other infectious diseases, as Soviet health propaganda continuously warned. The photographer seems to have deliberately posed his subjects to emphasize this dangerous communal supping: with the exception of the infant, all the people in the photograph clutch their offending spoons, two of which are literally poised in midair, and all stare fixedly at the transgressive shared bowl. The photograph therefore corroborates Trotsky's claim, in *Questions of Everyday Life*, that the Russian proletarian is not far removed from his barbarous peasant origins, and the bad habits and even the very material objects of backward peasant *byt* will follow him to his new, urban setting and threaten not only his life, with disease, but his socialist consciousness.

The photograph of Smirnov's family reveals the continuation of the traditional, "irrational" family and domestic relations that, for Trotsky, must be "reconstructed" in order for socialist consciousness to flower. He warns that the most pernicious and long-lasting effects of the proletariat's peasant origins are subjective: the oppressive relations between husbands and wives, parents and children. Trotsky blames these relations on the irrationality of the capitalist and feudal exploitative economic systems, maintaining that "years and decades" of socialist economic growth will be required before the conservatism of "personal and family *byt*" can be reconstructed from top to bottom (VB, p. 26). He identifies three goals for this reconstruction: the liberation of women from domestic slavery, the socialization of child care, and the liberation of marriage from private property relations (VB, p. 30).

As these goals demonstrate, the concept of the "new everyday life" (*novyi byt*) was meant to be liberatory for women. The *novyi byt* campaign, and in particular Trotsky's analyses of gender relations in *Questions of Everyday Life*, can therefore also be understood as a partial response to, or even cooptation of, the feminist voices within Bolshevism. The Bolsheviks, following the standard views of Marxism, held that women's oppression was an effect of capitalist conditions of exploitation, and that proletarian revolution would liberate all workers, male and female.¹³ Upon seizing power, the Bolsheviks enacted sweeping new legislation proclaiming women's equality, yet it soon became clear that the revolution had not automatically solved "the woman question." In 1919, the party created the *Zhenotdel* (*Zhenskii otdel* or women's section), which had the contradictory task of propagandizing socialism to women workers and educating them politically, at the same time as it maintained that women had no special needs beyond those of the proletariat as a whole. Beginning in 1920, the *Zhenotdel* was led by the

charismatic Bolshevik feminist Aleksandra Kollontai. Yet already by the end of 1921, Kollontai was forced out of the leadership of the *Zhenotdel*, and the section was soon systematically deprived of resources. The section had repeatedly called for greater state attention to problems of *byt*, with little result, and when it called for women's participation in the creation of communal institutions such as daycare centers, public laundries, and dining rooms, the party accused it of "feminist deviationism"—a serious charge that led to it being stripped, by 1923, of any real power.³⁴ The fact that Trotsky introduced questions of *byt* into public discussion, and called for workers themselves to take the initiative in reconstructing *byt*, therefore suggests that the party deliberately coopted the issue of *byt* from the *Zhenotdel* and its advocacy for women.

The paradoxical decision to debate the problem of *byt* without explicitly framing it as a women's issue resulted from the conflict between the two distinct sides of "the woman question": on the one hand, the Bolsheviks genuinely sought the emancipation of women, but on the other, they feared that backward, nonparty women would impede male party members and workers. While the *novyi byt* campaign in certain ways responded to the demands of the denigrated *Zhenotdel*—for example, it was aimed primarily at liberating women from domestic duties, and specifically critiqued at least some of the patriarchal aspects of marriage—it also turned the issue around to attack women for being themselves the obstacle to creating a new everyday life under socialism, because of their obstinate attachment to home and hearth, tradition and religion, or, more punitively, for their proclivity, either as pampered wives or as prostitutes, for avoiding socially useful, productive labor.³⁵ The primitiveness and passivity of *byt* that operated "behind the backs" of proletarians, so vividly evoked by Trotsky, became linked in the broader party debates with the fear of the social passivity and political backwardness of peasant and bourgeois women. The *novyi byt* was associated completely with women's issues in practice, if not in its stated theory.

Whether intending to liberate or discipline them, propaganda promoting the *novyi byt* was directed toward women, because everyday life was perceived to be their sphere of influence. Men obviously experienced everyday life as well; but they could not be expected to institute changes at the level of everyday experience, because their roles lay in public or working life. It would be absurd, for example, to imagine a propaganda poster exhorting fathers to place their children in the new cooperative day care centers. In the few examples of *novyi byt* propaganda directly addressed to men—other than public health messages functioning at a lower level of ambition, such as those urging them to wash their hands before eating,

or not to spit in the street—they are prodded simply to adhere to the standards of decency of traditional *byt*, in order to make life better for their wives and children. A poster addressing the struggle against profanity, for example, from a series of *novyi byt* propaganda posters from 1923, commands “Don’t curse! Foul language disgraces you, worker. Profanity is the legacy of your former enslavement. It sullies the spirit of your children, humiliates your wife and mother.”³⁶

Another poster from this same series appeals to the male worker to take the role of moral leader in the battle against prostitution, which was considered an aspect of the campaign for the *novyi byt* because of its effects on women, the family, and sexual health. The main text reads: “Having wiped out capitalism, the proletariat will wipe out prostitution” (figure 2.8).³⁷ The Bolsheviks treated prostitution primarily as a problem of female inequality under capitalism; the woman was a victim of economic circumstances, and it was the responsibility of the new socialist government to combat the problem without further victimizing the woman—even if, in practice, saving women from prostitution sometimes meant incarcerating them in labor camps.³⁸ The handsome, muscular worker, dressed in strangely timeless white garb and holding a hammer, strides into the picture as a larger-than-life savior, trampling fat capitalists as he takes the hand of the smaller, barefoot woman. The text banners below amplify this obvious visual message of woman as victim in need of salvation: “Prostitution is a great misfortune of humanity. [Male] worker: take care of the woman worker.” Unlike most propaganda, however, this poster is unusually vague in its directive: other than not patronizing prostitutes himself, what exactly is the individual male worker whom it addresses being asked to do? A worker pulling a prostitute off the street while she was working would hardly be welcomed by her, unless, theoretically, he were offering to marry and support her—but this would conflict with Bolshevik theory, which condemned traditional marriage, in which the husband supported the wife, as a property relation akin to prostitution. The worker pictured here seems to function more as a highly gendered representation of the proletarian government itself, whose task it is to help women transcend the squalor of the old *byt*, including prostitution. *Byt* was the purview of the male worker only in his role as a protector of the women and children whose presence in effect defined the term.

Trotsky’s writings on *byt* do not explicitly attack women, as do those of some of his colleagues, nor does he paint women simplistically as hapless victims; his emphasis is on realistic strategies for the emancipation of women. In his essay “From the Old Family to the New,” he admits the difficulty of this proposition: it

is one thing for the Bolshevik government simply to legislate the political equality of women and men, another to attempt to establish equality in the workplace, and another, more difficult matter altogether to establish actual equality between the man and woman within the family. At the same time, measures to promote political equality and equality in the workplace—measures the government could realistically enforce—would never have any serious effect without real equality in the home: "Politics are flexible," he writes, "but *byt* is immobile and obstinate" (VB, p. 40). In its passivity, *byt* can never be a site for political action, but rather must be obliterated as a separate sphere of life. Trotsky argues that the only way to promote real equality between women and men is to build up the Soviet economy to the point that it will be rich enough to liberate the family from the material worries that destroy it, and allow women to participate fully in productive labor, through public laundries, dining halls, sewing workshops, and child care.

For this study, the significance of Trotsky's particular articulation of *byt* is the way that he ties socialist subjectivity to the personal relations not just between people, but between people and material objects. His attack on *byt* is an attack on its sheer material weight, pointing to the way that, in the evocative words of Maurice Blanchot, the everyday "tends unendingly to weigh down into things."³⁷ If we go back to the dictionary and look again under *byt*, we find that in old Russian, one of its original meanings was simply "goods and chattel" or "property."³⁸ The very term *byt* therefore directs us toward material possessions. Trotsky argues that a *novyi byt* can accomplish equality between women and men only through the virtual elimination of possessions: the complete rationalization of the material order of domestic life from above, by the state. "Only then," Trotsky writes, "will the relation of husband and wife be freed of everything external, foreign, binding, incidental. The one will cease oppressing the other. Genuine equality will be established. The relation will be determined only by mutual attraction" (VB, p. 45).

In this evocation of a love relationship unhampered by possessions or women's traditional dependence on men, and based on true attraction, Trotsky in effect restated Kollontai's famous description of a form of "free love" under socialism. Her concept of a new form of love was not an excuse for promiscuity, as her many critics claimed, but an argument that a woman could become an equal in a romantic relationship only if that relationship were freed of the physical and psychological effects of the property relation, which made women the possessions as well as dependents of men.³⁹ Kollontai had long been criticized



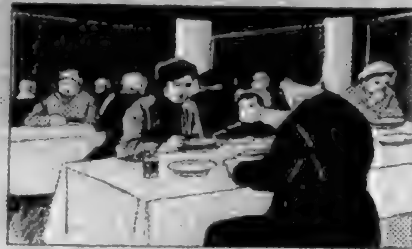
FIGURE 2.8

Poster: "Having wiped out capitalism the proletariat will wipe out prostitution," 1923.
 Courtesy Russian State Library Department of Graphics, Moscow. See plate 1.

КООПЕРАЦИЯ ОСВОБОЖДАЕТ ЖЕНЩИНУ ОТ ТЯГОТ ДОМАШНЕГО ХОЗЯЙСТВА.



Домашняя кухня.



Кооперативная столовая.



Дети без присмотра.



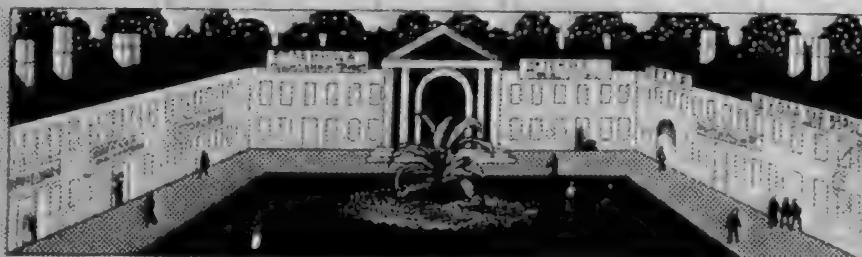
Дети в кооперативной школе.



Домашняя стирка.



Кооперативная прачечная.



К новому быту через кооперацию.

Дизайн: В. 1924
Художественное Государство в Ленинграде
Октябрь 1924



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ КООПЕРАЦИИ
Петроград, Дум

FIGURE 2.9

Poster: "Cooperation liberates woman from the burdens of housekeeping. To the new everyday life through cooperation," 1924. Courtesy Russian State Library Department of Graphics, Moscow.

for her belief in the centrality of a new kind of nonpossessive love for building proletarian culture; Trotsky's similar, if differently framed, point received no such censure.⁴² Yet even though Trotsky's vision of a domestic life based on sexual equality bears similarities to Kollontai's explicitly feminist vision, his proposed solution for achieving it ends up reasserting traditionally gendered, hierarchical cultural categories: "human" spiritual relations become possible only with the elimination of matter—which, in his account, is persistently tied to the domestic sphere occupied by women, and therefore understood as feminine.

The association of femininity with matter can be traced back to Aristotle and a set of etymologies that link matter with *mater* and *matrix*, or the womb. "[T]o invoke matter," as Judith Butler has put it, "is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should surely be an *object* of feminist inquiry, but which would be quite problematic as a *ground* of feminist theory."⁴³ From this contemporary feminist perspective, Trotsky and the Bolshevik *byt* reformers, with their undoubted good intentions to emancipate women, can be faulted precisely for taking the association of femininity with matter as the *ground* of their program. Kollontai herself relied on assumptions about women's essential nature in her proposals for improving the lives of women, calling the maternal instinct, and women's instinct to care for children, "natural-biological."⁴⁴ In the 1920s, text after text and poster after poster—whether authored by men or women—assumed that women were responsible for the reproduction of material life. The only solution to this burden of responsibility was the total removal of women's domestic duties from the sphere of the home and into the hands of the socialist state. The idea that sexual equality in the home could be brought about simply by sharing tasks between the sexes was essentially inconceivable.⁴⁵

Trotsky's vision of a domestic life literally emptied of "binding" and "incidental" objects instances the Bolshevik urge to clear away the detritus of the private object world, to destroy *byt* in favor of the higher, dematerialized sphere of *byt'ie*. The antiprostitution poster produces this effect visually, by contrasting the large, simplified white form of the male worker with the cluttered forms of buildings, brick walls, and crowds of people surrounding the woman, who is literally bound by the swirling banners of text. This paradoxical antimaterialism of the *novyi byt* is figured most often in propaganda posters by the ubiquitous before-after pictorial model, such as in a poster from the town of Rostov-on-Don of 1924, whose boldface texts at top and bottom read: "Cooperation liberates woman from the burdens of housekeeping. To the new everyday life through cooperation" (figure 2.9).⁴⁶ The term "cooperation" (*kooperatsiia*) referred to stores and services

provided by state-affiliated organizations, as distinct from privately held ones. The more freely drawn left side shows three disorderly scenes from the old way of life under capitalism: an overburdened woman cooking in the squalor of a private kitchen; untended children; and a woman doing the backbreaking work of hand-washing linen. People interact with each other and with objects to the point of excess; witness the hot stove and overflowing pot, the fisticuffs and pickpocketing, the soapy water and the body bent forward over the washtub. The highly geometric right side, in contrast, displays parallel scenes ordered and modernized by collective socialist wealth: a state-run cooperative cafeteria, a school, and a laundry complete with a sign reading "disinfecting chamber." The objects have been almost completely removed, and those that remain are uniform and utterly plain: white bowls on white tablecloths on the table, white rectangles of paper on the school desk. If the liberal use of hatch-marks in the drawings on the left side conveys noisy commotion and clutter, the preponderance of simple color fields on the right and bottom invokes a motionless silence.

The poster advertises a *novyi byt* that has liberated woman, but women are still doing the laundry. Their liberation is registered visually only by the spare, geometric spaces on the right side of the poster: the women now glide along the straight, vertical paths in the mechanized laundry on the lower right, seemingly caught in the vacuum left by the elimination of the object world from the touch and control of the individual. In none of the right-hand images do people's gazes meet. Trotsky's dream of revolutionary subjects "freed of everything external, foreign, binding, incidental" becomes, in this admittedly schematic poster, a nightmare vision of subjective alienation. Yet there were many posters like this, as well as schematic "sketches" of domestic scenarios in the many articles on *byt* in the popular press, and they all suggested that in the imaging of the *novyi byt*, the primary aspect of *byt* itself—the everyday object world—would be eliminated. If *byt* will be *novyi*, it will no longer be *byt* at all, but something much closer to *bytie*. The campaign for the *novyi byt* therefore defied the very cultural logic of *byt*. The Bolsheviks could imagine transforming *byt* only by overcoming it, because of their peculiarly Russian brand of Marxism, which was philosophically materialist, at the level of *bytie*, but ascetic and antimaterialist at the level of *byt*.

Lef and *Byt*

When it came to attacking *byt*, there was no great divide between mass propaganda and the avant-garde. A diatribe against *byt* written by Sergei Tret'iakov appeared in a no less pivotal venue than the inaugural issue of the journal *Lef* in March of 1923.

in a position piece on Futurism entitled "Where From, Where To?"⁴⁷ Tret'iakov's dim view of *byt* has much in common with the antimaterialism of Trotsky and the propaganda posters, though significantly for this study, his focus is not on state interventions into everyday life, but on the role of the Futurist—which is to say, the left artist, such as Tatlin—in creating a new form of socialist life. The article responds to critics, including Lenin, who deemed the Futurist *Lef* group irrelevant to the needs of the new Bolshevik state.⁴⁸ Tret'iakov argues that Futurism was never a true school, but rather a "social-aesthetic tendency" (p. 193) uniting artists in their hatred for petty bourgeois art and *byt*. In the ten years since its inauguration in Russia in 1913, he writes, Futurism has grown up, in step with the development of the consciousness of the proletariat and the revolution, into a worldview with the aim of "the production of the new person through the use of art as one of the weapons of this production" (p. 195). The "battle" for the "psychological structure" of this new person will be an "inevitable battle against *byt*" (p. 200).

In his claim that Futurism has battled petty bourgeois *byt* since its earliest incarnation in 1913, Tret'iakov adds to the complex associations of *byt* by pairing it with another key concept in Russian culture, *meshchanstvo*, meaning, approximately, the petty bourgeoisie or the state of being petty bourgeois—often translated into English as "Philistinism." Like *byt*, the word *meshchanstvo* originally had a neutral, institutional meaning: it defined an official stratum of society, namely city dwellers of the lowest rank such as traders, artisans, servants, and soldiers. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the term take on the negative meanings of bad taste, banality, and materialism that the elite strata of Russian society associated with the *meshchanstvo*.⁴⁹ This degraded urban model of *meshchanskii byt* presented the greatest danger to the development of the "new person" after the revolution because it was the model that beguiled the working class: the Russian proletariat was caught between the reality of its primitive *byt* of peasant customs imperfectly transplanted to urban conditions, and its understandable aspirations toward the comforts of *meshchanskii byt*.⁵⁰

Tret'iakov defines *byt*, like Trotsky, in terms that emphasize its atavistic force, but even more explicitly than Trotsky he stresses the reactionary power of the material objects comprised by *byt* (p. 200):

And by *byt* in the objective sense we mean that stable order and character of objects with which the person surrounds himself and to which, regardless of their usefulness, he transfers the fetishism of his sympathies and memories and in the end literally becomes the slave of these objects. In this sense *byt* is

a deeply reactionary force, that which in pivotal moments of social change prevents the organization of the will of a class for plotting decisive assaults. Comfort for comfort's sake; coziness as an end in itself; all the chains of tradition and of respect for objects that have lost their practical meaning, beginning with the neck tie and ending with religious fetishes—this is the quagmire of *byt*.

Tret'iakov's metaphors invoke material impediments to physical and spiritual mobility: the person becomes a "slave" to objects; enslavement is enforced by the binding "chains of tradition"; the stultifying "comfort for comfort's sake" of the cozy bourgeois home restrains the person physically like the sticky and enveloping "quagmire of *byt*." Passive and conservative, *byt* prevents revolutionary action. The person invests his sympathies and memories in objects, rather than in higher goals of social change. By associating *byt* with religious fetishes and the swamp ("quagmire"), Tret'iakov links even modern, urban, *meshchanskii byt* with the primitive peasant *byt* that had been the object of Trotsky's critique.

Tret'iakov's virulent critique of the material objects of *byt* produces the traditional Russian opposition between material and spiritual, *byt* and *bytie*. Futurism, he writes, will involve "not *byt* in its stagnancy and dependence upon the clichéd order of objects, but *bytie*—dialectically experiencing reality, in the process of uninterrupted becoming" (p. 200). Tret'iakov's Futurist, Marxist version of *bytie* will be the realm of the new Futurist personality, who will be energetic, inventive, disciplined. In direct combat with NEP profiteering, which "Americanizes" the personality, the Futurist personality will contribute his entire productive output to the Bolshevik collective: "the Futurist must be least of all the owner of his own production. His battle is with the hypnosis of names and the patents associated with them. . . . It does not matter that people will forget his name—what matters is that his inventions will enter into living circulation, where they will give birth to new improvements and new training" (p. 201). Tret'iakov's critique is directed here more pointedly at exclusive possession, at the social constructions that bind people to material objects, than at objects themselves; he insists, after all, that new objects need to be "invented." But his rhetoric betrays the ascetic Bolshevik impulse to transcend the passive material world of *byt* in order to achieve a more meaningful existence of revolutionary action. Freed from the "clichéd order of objects," Tret'iakov's Futurist will float free with new energy and inventiveness, just like Trotsky's husband and wife "freed of everything external, foreign, binding, incidental."

"Everyday-Life-Creation" and the Active Material Object

Tatlin flew in the face of this avant-garde and Bolshevik antimaterialism. Although the plain functionality of Tatlin's objects worked to deny the structures of acquisitive possessiveness derided by Tret'iakov, he deliberately produced objects that would be immediately useful in "our simple and primitive everyday life" rather than in a Futurist *byt'e* or Bolshevik *novyi byt* of gleaming communal cafeterias and public laundries. Tatlin, with his left avant-garde pedigree stretching back to the early 1910s, and his insistence on the collective, anonymous nature of the work of his Section for Material Culture, would seem to be the prototype for Tret'iakov's Futurist inventor, yet he departed from Tret'iakov's vision by deliberately miring himself in the devalued, and, as we have seen, feminized, order of *byt*. The photographs accompanying the article on his work in *Krasnaia panorama* tie him to his everyday objects, as he models the practical clothing and is posed in front of the wood-burning stove. The bold title "Novyi byt" at the top of the page is slightly incongruous, compared to most propaganda posters with that title, given the decidedly gritty and nonfuturistic look of the illustrations. His objects seem to be shaped by the needs of *byt*, rather than by his visual invention as an artist. We recall his declaration of 1920: "Distrusting the eye, we place it under the control of touch."

Tatlin's project found its theoretical ally in a different strand of *Lef* thinking, represented by Boris Arvatov. For Arvatov, *byt* was a potentially active force. In his essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing," he claimed that the creation of proletarian culture "can proceed only from the forms of material *byt*."⁵¹ This culture would emerge not by transcending the material sphere, but by "organically" and "flexibly" working within it in order to transform it in a process of "everyday-life-creation [*byt'otvorchestvo*]" (EL, p. 121). Organic and flexible are the right terms to describe Tatlin's willingness to direct his artistic practice toward the kinds of things that were really needed in the contemporary conditions of *byt*, despite the fact that it involved a radically different, and traditionally less valued, kind of "creation" from his previous avant-garde endeavors. Arvatov and Tatlin knew each other through the INKHUK; Arvatov was a strong supporter of Tatlin, and his formulation of a theory of the socialist object clearly shows the marks of his knowledge of Tatlin's work.⁵² Conversely, when Tatlin offers a theoretical justification for the "research" work of his Section in his 1924 report, he seems to draw on Arvatov's thinking: "Recognizing . . . that the shaping principle of culture, production and experience is material," he writes, "the Section for Material Culture sets itself the task of: 1) Research into material as the shaping principle of culture. 2) Research into *byt*

as a certain form of material culture."⁵³ This notion of material as an actively "shaping" principle is reminiscent of the "volition of the material" that guided the form of his reliefs, in Gough's propitious phrasing. But if the "volition" of the material in the reliefs was formal, in the sense that the materials themselves determined the form of the final sculptural object, the "shaping" principle of material in *byt* is a social one.

Arvatov had theorized this social version of the "volition of material" in 1922 in his Marxist history of art, "Art and Production."⁵⁴ He declared the dualism of *byt* and *bytie* to be a historical artifact of capitalism. In the precapitalist past, he claimed, the artist was simply the most qualified of craftsmen, an inventor and innovator who made things to satisfy the functional demands of *byt*. Both the functional and the visual properties of a thing contributed to its active, almost animate powers of "organizing material *byt*."⁵⁵ Under capitalist industrialization, however, the artist feared that mass-machine-production would make him obsolete, and he retreated into specialized craft. This was a mistake, according to Arvatov; the artist should have embraced industrial production, because it represented the most advanced form of human imagination. But instead the artist under capitalism turned to handcrafting luxury objects to satisfy the demands of the eye: "artistic objects were now hidden under glass, that is, they were murdered as objects, and remained only as naked visual forms."⁵⁶ The anthropomorphizing verb "murdered" signals the object's extraordinary animation in Arvatov's account. The active totality of the material object within everyday life was violently sundered by bourgeois aesthetics, which rendered the visual into a passive quality, and placed visual objects in glass coffins. His critique of bourgeois aesthetics for isolating the visual from the other senses, and so turning visual objects into spectacles cut off from the social context in which they were made and in which they should have had a social function, is similar to Walter Benjamin's critique of the alienation of the senses under capitalism, and especially fascism, in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."⁵⁷ Arvatov's theory of an aesthetics made whole again under socialism imagines that industrial technology will amplify and clarify all the human senses, rather than isolate and alienate them. His theory of material culture is therefore politically ambitious: the material culture of socialism will make the subject critical and conscious, and therefore invulnerable to the lure of capitalism.

This distrust for the eye in Arvatov's history of art, which seemed to entail a total rejection of the visual as an isolated sense, was criticized for denying to

proletarian culture the potential political power of the visual arts. In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky criticized *Lef* on precisely this point: "to reject art as a means of picturing, of imaging knowledge, is in truth to strike from the hands of the class that is building the new society its most important weapon."⁵⁸ Arvatov responded in *Lef* that critics mistakenly took the Constructivists' struggle against easel art—which he calls the most bourgeois form of visual art that oppressively promotes passive contemplation—for a struggle against all visual art. *Lef* does promote visual art, he argues, but only the kind of art that makes sense in the epoch of proletarian dictatorship: "Decisively rejecting living-room and museum oriented easel art, *Lef* is fighting for the poster, the illustration, the advertisement, the photo- and kino-montage, i.e. for those kinds of mass *utilitarian* forms of visual art that are made by means of machine technology and closely connected with the material *byt* of urban industrial workers."⁵⁹ Arvatov here endeavors to recapture, under modern conditions of industrial production, the lost relation of the artist to the everyday material life of the community that his history of art ascribes to the precapitalist era.

The theoretical explanation for Arvatov's idealized notion of the active material object that existed before capitalism's isolation of visual art from other forms of making was the concept he called the "monism of things [*veshchnyi monizm*]" (EL, p. 127)—an idiosyncratic development of the nineteenth-century Marxist Georgii Plekhanov's concept of monism, which was itself developed out of Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach.⁶⁰ This thesis criticized Feuerbach's dualistic distinction between sensuous objects themselves and those objects as contemplated by human beings. Marx argued for the necessary identity of material with human consciousness: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation* [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice* [*Praxis*], not subjectively."⁶¹ The thing must be understood not only as an object of human thought, as in the idealist view, which distinguishes between thought and matter, but as actually constituted by human praxis, as in the materialist or monist view, which resists that distinction as ideologically motivated. Judith Butler purs this cogently in her philosophical study of matter: "If materialism were to take account of praxis as that which constitutes the very matter of objects, and praxis is understood as socially transformative activity, then such activity is understood as constitutive of materiality itself . . . according to this new kind of materialism that Marx proposes, the object is not only

transformed, but in some significant sense, the object is transformative activity itself."⁶² Arvatov's "monism of things" takes Marx's materialism in a more literal direction, by imagining that not only the "object" in the philosophical sense—in which there is a slippage between material and ideal, matter and spirit—but the "thing" in the material sense will once again have "volition" because of its connection to "sensuous human activity." This socialist "culture of the thing" will return *byt* to being the site of human creativity—of "everyday-life-creation"—that it was before capitalism.

Arvatov's enthusiasm for artistic creativity within *byt* was not shared by many others in the Soviet art world. In an article in the journal *Soviet Art* in 1925, the critic Robert Pel'she ridicules Arvatov and his *Lef* colleague Nikolai Chuzhak for their rejection of painting and sculpture and their obsession with making everyday things as the only appropriate form of artistic activity.⁶³ Pel'she is responding specifically to articles by Arvatov and Chuzhak in the same issue of *Soviet Art*: Arvatov indicts the return of easel painting during NEP in an essay entitled "Reaction in Painting," while Chuzhak's essay "The Art of Everyday Life" defends "the proletariat's young instinct of healthy dialectical 'thing-ness' [*veshchnost*]."⁶⁴ According to Pel'she, the Productivists' insistence on the useful material thing might seem to uphold a Marxist notion of materialism, but it actually reinforces the most banal, bourgeois dualism between matter and spirit, body and soul; it is insufficiently dialectical. He dismisses the "notorious ideology of 'thing-ness'" as *Lefist* sectarianism and anarchic philosophy that "takes on the character of some kind of fetish, some kind of idolatry."⁶⁵ For the Productivists, a picture or a statue are not true "things" because they do not affect the person physically: "the new life will be built and organized only through such a 'thinglike origin' [*veshchnoe nachalo*] of art as a pot, a spoon, a bucket (Comrade Chuzhak really likes dishes)."⁶⁶ We have already heard Arvatov's explanation that he was only against pictures and statues in the current historical moment, as they did not correspond to the conditions of contemporary proletarian *byt*. But Pel'she's snide litany of pots and buckets—an obvious invocation of the everyday objects made by Tatlin at that time—and his derisive potshot at Chuzhak for liking dishes reveal the anti-feminine underpinnings of his criticism of the Productivist engagement with *byt*. Pel'she's derision is predictable: in Russian everyday life, men have nothing to do with dishes, and male artists certainly should not descend to that mundane level.

Pel'she's mocking, misleading description of the *Lefists'* theory of the everyday thing, and his call for a more "dialectical" understanding of Marxist materialism,

can be understood as a front for a far simpler response: the traditional Russian rejection of passive and feminine *byt*. Whether or not we are convinced by Arvatov's concepts of a "monism of things" and "everyday-life-creation," it is clear that they contest this particular misogynist tradition.⁶⁷ Unlike most of his contemporaries, Arvatov does not feminize *byt* as a category; for him, *byt* is not inherently passive, but a potential site of active creation. Similarly, Tatlin's stated commitment to "research into everyday life" suggests that for him, *byt* is not a passive category, but one that holds the promise of social transformation. He does not distinguish between the significance of his grander artistic projects, like *Monument to the Third International*, and his plain everyday objects, as suggested by an inventory included in one of his production reports on the work of his Section: "material constructions: objects, partly extant, partly made in the studio—the model of the Monument, stove, dishes, dresses."⁶⁸ All are presented as the results of his imaginative material experimentation. While neither Arvatov nor Tatlin are explicitly committed to reclaiming *byt* as a feminine area of experience, in the interests of supporting women, they also do not attempt to appropriate and transform *byt* in the interest of making it over into a masculine *bytie*. Arvatov's theory of *byt* and Tatlin's everyday objects cannot be described as intentionally feminist, but they challenge some of the most entrenched gendered categories of Russian culture as part of their goal of creating a better socialist life.

The "Volition of the Material" in Tatlin's Everyday Objects

Tatlin's design for a traditional Russian wood-burning stove was meant to contribute to the heart of the feminine domestic domain: the kitchen. Beyond facilitating women's task of cooking food, the stove also, in typical Constructivist fashion, performed a number of other functions, such as heating the room and providing a source of hot water. The laconic "New Everyday Life" article enumerates the stove's technical specifications, in words likely provided by Tatlin himself:

this stove has an economical furnace providing a sizable heating effect with a small expenditure of wood (six logs). The stove is supplied with an oven and a large hermetically sealed chamber that keeps water and food hot for 28-30 hours and, at the same time, with only one furnace it can heat a room of 8x6 arshins at a height of 6 arshins for 48 hours, maintaining a temperature of 14-16 degrees Réaumur.⁶⁹

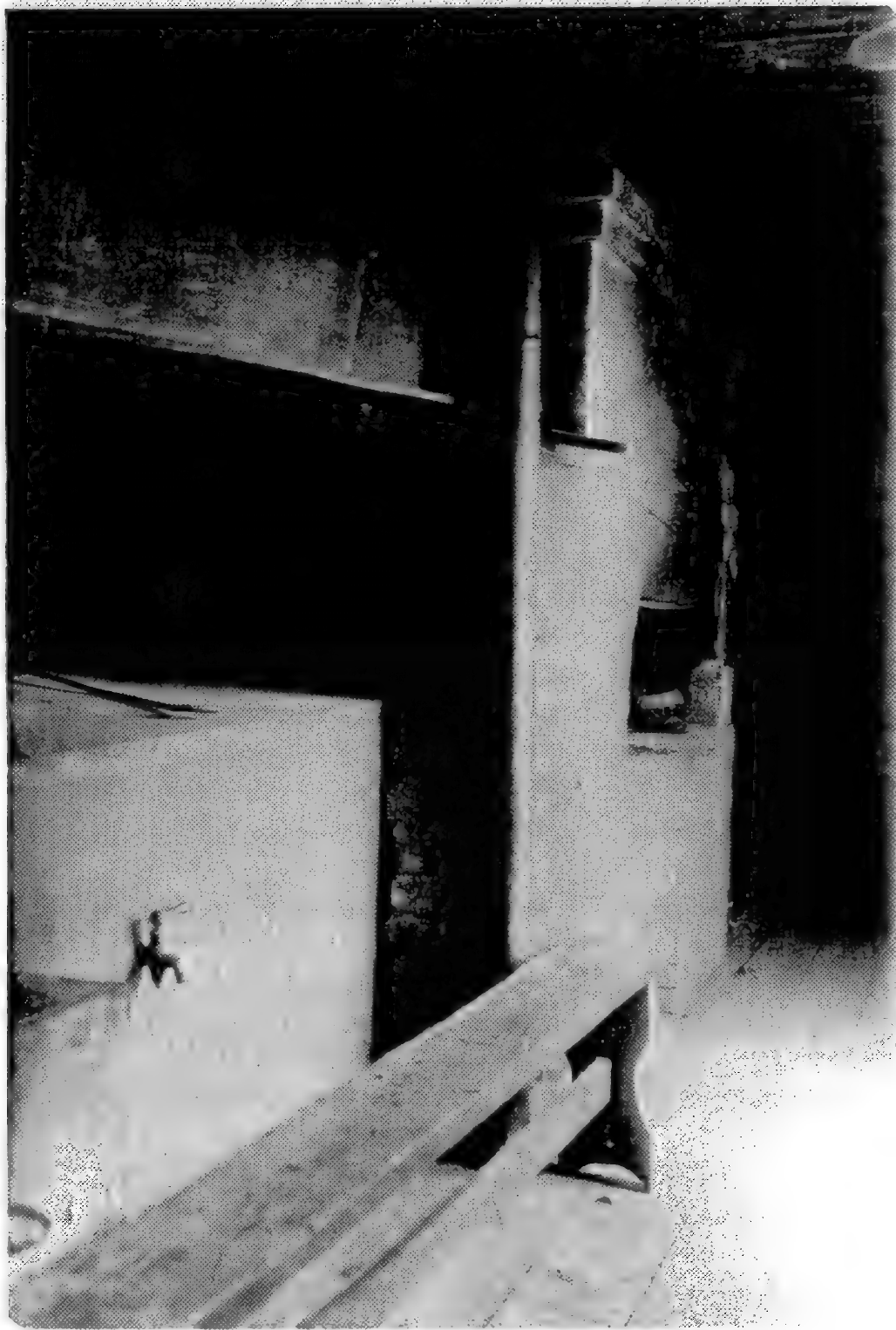


FIGURE 2.10

A stove in the kitchen of textile-factory workers in Smolensk village, 1923.
Courtesy Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg.

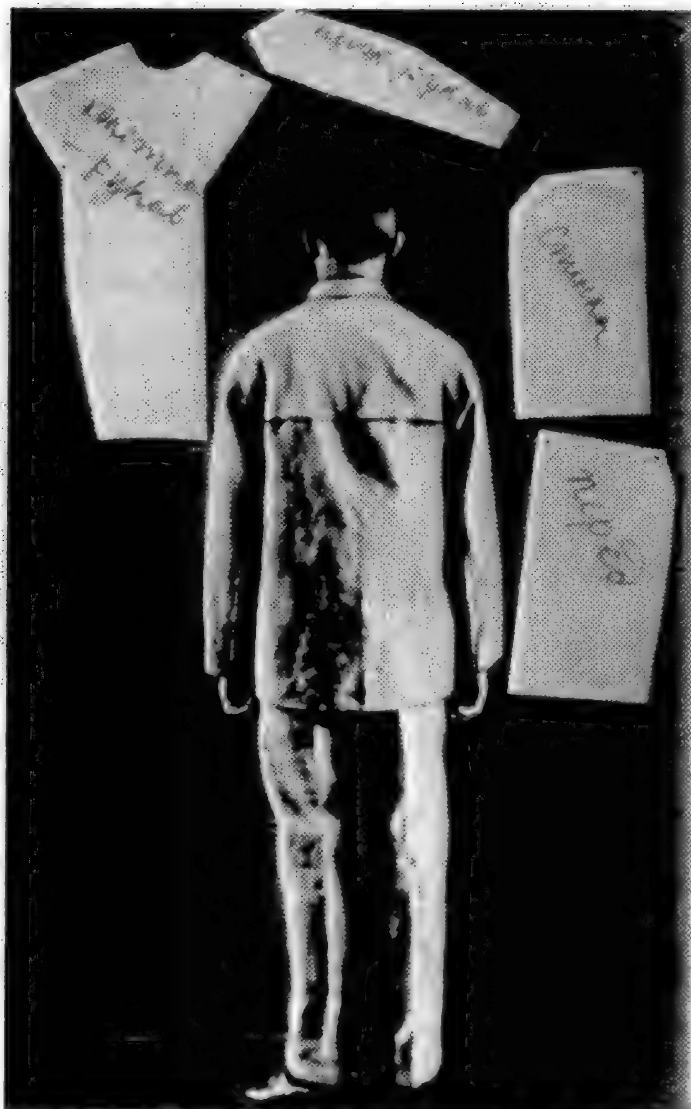
Tatlin provides no such detailed description of the visual qualities of the stove, keeping the focus firmly on the stove's function. Yet the description, technical as it is, delineates a social function for this object that exceeds a narrow functionalism: as a source of heat, hot water, and nourishment, the stove would anchor the room, and in many cases the entire living space, of the stove's users. It would "organize material *byt*," in the words of Arvatov.

The large wood-burning stove, plain and rectangular in form, had traditionally organized the domestic space of the home in Russian village life. People even slept on it, since it was the warmest place in the house. Such stoves continued to be used in the more modern settings of dormitories and communal houses, as well as in urban apartments, albeit on a necessarily smaller scale. A photograph commissioned by the inquisitive ethnographer E. Medvedev from the Russian Museum shows a typical stove in a communal house occupied by textile-factory workers in Smolensk village, near Leningrad, in 1925 (figure 2.10).⁷⁰ The visual form of Tatlin's stove, photographed in the "New Everyday Life" illustration from the same angle as the textile workers' stove, does not differ markedly from the traditional one; the two stoves share such features as the water spigot and the placement and shape of the opening into the range, as well as the general rectangular shape. Tatlin's stove does appear to be functionally advanced: the tiled exterior is more modern and hygienic; his design efficiently condenses the different parts of the larger stove, including the chamber containing heated water, into one structure; it provides glass shutters for the opening into the range, which allows the area above the range to function as the "hermetically sealed chamber" for keeping food heated, and allows the cook to see in without unsealing the chamber; and the stove would smoke less than the iron stoves in wide use at the time, given its sophisticated furnace system.⁷¹ His design in effect maximizes the functional qualities of the traditional stove, making it optimally useful for urban *byt* at that time. A fuel-efficient stove that could keep water and food hot for long periods was especially helpful in cities, where sources of firewood were unreliable and street vendors could charge astronomical prices for it, and where many tall apartment buildings were without hot running water.

The stove design therefore seems to reflect the results of some form of "research into *byt*," and we happen to know the specific nature of the "research" in this case: Tatlin originally designed a version of this stove to meet the needs of his own home. Tatlin did joiner's work all his life, making things like benches and billiard tables, and as early as 1920–1921 he had made two economical stoves for himself in order to experiment and, more saliently, to heat his apartment

"Originally," Zhadova writes, "the artist did not attach any professional significance" to the making of these stoves.⁷² But when, in the Section for Material Culture, he did begin to attach professional significance to objects that would transform *byt*, he realized that he already had developed an object that responded to the demands of "our simple and primitive everyday life." Developing his earlier, amateur utilitarian stoves into five different prototypes for new kinds of stoves in his professional work in the Section in 1924, he did not embellish them aesthetically. Although Zhadova proposes that the stove resembles a modernist cube, and refers to an article by Kazimir Malevich from 1929 in which he emphasizes the "artistic character" of the stove's form, this seems to be stretching things: the rectangular form derives from the traditions of stove-making more than from geometric modernism.⁷³ The technical inventiveness of the stove might be related in spirit to the quasi-engineerism of the suspended *Corner Counter-Reliefs* series, but not in form. As Punin declared, if the stove can be called artistic at all, then it will be by virtue of being made by Tatlin the artist, not by virtue of its visual form. This stove, he writes, "could probably be put together by any good stove maker."⁷⁴ The volition of material life itself had determined the form of Tatlin's stove.

Tatlin's designs for clothing are similarly plain and functional. Yet his design for a men's sportswear suit made from linen of 1924-1925, which we saw pasted onto the photomontage based on the "New Everyday Life" article (see figure 2.3), has an unusually boxy visual form that differs markedly from contemporary men's clothing.⁷⁵ The simple tab collar of the jacket is reminiscent of the traditional Russian peasant shirt, the belted *rubashka*, which had become popular among Communists, but the rest of the jacket does not conform to any traditions of Russian *byt*. As with her analysis of the stove, Zhadova again proposes that his suits were based on "geometric planes" deriving from Cubism.⁷⁶ The connection between the squared-off jacket with its cross-shaped seams, on the one hand, and Cubism, on the other, might seem tenuous, but it is supported by a pair of unusual photomontages that he made to document the suit, in which photographs of Tatlin himself modeling the prototype of the suit from front and back are carefully framed by the labeled pattern pieces for the jacket, tacked to the wall (figures 2.11, 2.12). The large, semirectangular shapes of the pattern pieces on the wall recall the irregular shapes of the jutting pieces of sheet metal suspended against the corner walls in *Corner Counter-Relief* no. 133 (see figure 2.6), while the framing function of the pattern pieces recalls the triangular piece of sheet metal framed by the conventionally rectangular picture frame in *Painterly Relief* 1915 (see figure 2.5). This rectangular painterly relief, with its strong central vertical element



FIGURES 2.11, 2.12

Vladimir Tatlin modeling his men's sportswear suit with pattern pieces, front and back views, 1924/1925.

of a wooden stick, crossed by the sheet metal and glass elements, is echoed by the rectangle of the jacket, as well as the cross formed by the jacket's central vertical and upper horizontal seams. In the case of the suit more than the stove, the form of the object has not been strictly determined by the material demands of *byt*, but also clearly incorporates Tatlin's own visual proclivities, making it less anonymous. In contrast to Punin's claim about the stove, this suit could not have been designed by any good tailor.

Nor would this suit have been designed by a good tailor, because it represented a programmatic rejection of conventional men's dress of the moment in urban Soviet Russia. The actual suit modeled by Tatlin in the photographs was produced as a single prototype example in the factory workshop of the state-owned Leningrad Clothing Manufacturers' Trust (Leningradodezhda), on the basis of a design he had worked out while serving as a member of the Soviet on Standard Clothing at the Institute of Decorative Arts in Leningrad. Tatlin's plan had been for the trust to mass-produce his various standard patterns for clothing, but nothing was ever produced past the prototype stage. The reasons for this become clear if we examine a poster advertisement from Leningradodezhda from around 1924: the slim, natty figure of the man in the drawing, in his elegantly fitted, accessorized suit, underlines the weirdness of Tatlin's stiff, boxy outfit, which is at once rustic and futuristic (figure 2.13).⁷ Like other state-owned businesses in 1924, Leningradodezhda was expected to turn a profit and it therefore catered to the tastes of the NEP consumer public, for which, as we have already seen in his angry scribbles denouncing the men in their "beautiful" suits on the "New Everyday Life" photomontage (see figure 2.3), Tatlin had only contempt.

As viewers with an interest in the fate of Tatlin's avant-garde origins in the face of his deliberately anonymous everyday objects, we can identify the vaguely geometric forms of his sportswear suit as a stylistic rebuttal of the cut of fashionable NEP-era suits. But artistic choice tells only part of the story; as with his stove, the motivation for the visual form of the suit also stems from Tatlin's perception of the needs of contemporary *byt*. "This clothing," he had scrawled next to the photograph of his suit, "is made with the advantage of being warm, not restricting movement, being hygienic and lasting longer." The cotton linen fabric of the suit was easier to clean than the traditional wools of men's suits, and therefore more hygienic, while the wide, boxy shape of the jacket was meant not just as a politically motivated visual contrast to elegantly fitted men's suits, but as a more comfortable alternative, allowing freedom of movement to work. Tatlin's unadorned suit functions as a white-collar equivalent to the clothes worn by



FIGURE 2.13

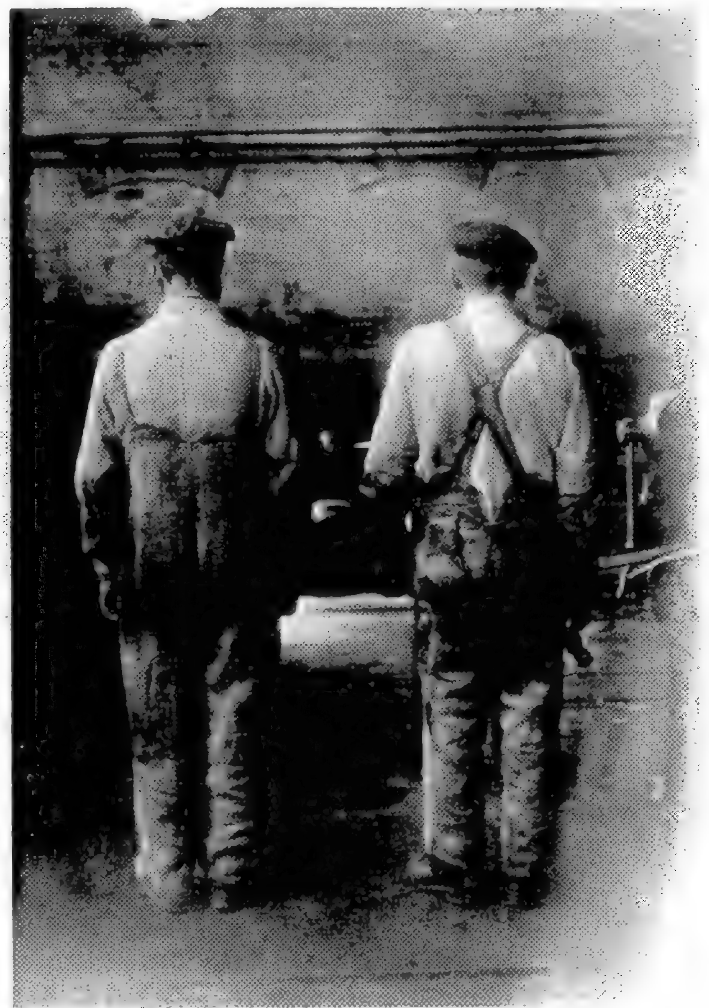
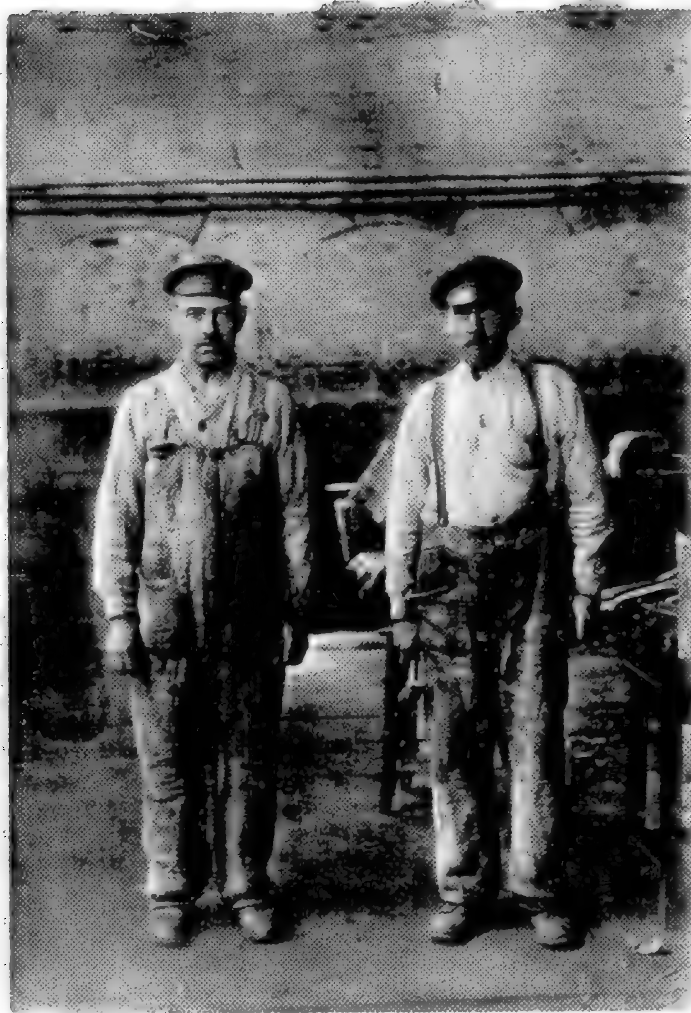
Advertising poster for Leningradodezhda, c. 1924. Courtesy Russian State Library Department of Graphics, Moscow. Photo by the author.

workers, drawing on the simplicity and practicality of plain work clothes to reinvent the men's suit.

Tatlin's study of workers' clothing joins his own "research into *byt*" with the practices of the professional ethnographers who researched workers' *byt* (*rabochii byt*), such as Medvedev from the Russian Museum. The two photographs of Tatlin in his awkward, rigid stance, posing from the front and the back to ensure that the suit is thoroughly documented, are oddly reminiscent of a pair of actual ethnographic photographs of two workers from the Baltiiskii Shipbuilding Factory in Leningrad in 1924, which lay just across town from Tatlin's studio (figures 2.14, 2.15).⁷⁶ They were taken by the photographer K. Kubesh, who worked with Medvedev on several research forays into factories and workers' housing in Leningrad. The two workers posing here in their production clothing (*prozodezhda*) overalls have the somewhat uncomprehending look of the subject who is told to pose as himself—to fully inhabit his assigned role in life and present himself as an object for the documentary photograph. They were even told to turn around to present their backsides to the camera. They stand awkwardly, nervously; the man on the right has his left arm poised, half bent, as if he wasn't able to decide where to put it before the shutter clicked.

The resemblance between the front and back photographs of Tatlin in his suit and the workers in their overalls may be fortuitous, but it forces us to recognize that the anonymous, documentary nature of the photographs of Tatlin is deliberate, because his practice in material culture is allied with the earnest project of research into *byt*.⁷⁹ Just as the photographs of the two workers exist to document their clothing, rather than these men as individuals, so the photographs of Tatlin emphasize the qualities of the suit, from front and back, rather than the personality of Tatlin the artist. And just as the workers are photographed at their work site surrounded by industrial equipment, with the man on the right holding a hammer in one hand and another tool in the other, so the photographs of Tatlin's suit emphasize the potentially industrial process for producing it through the display of the simplified pattern pieces surrounding him.⁸⁰ The suit's standardization and ease of assembly is guaranteed by the lack of any individualized fitting or tucking or detailing; shaping the suit to the lines of the individual body would respond to the demands of fashion, while Tatlin's goal is to respond to the requirements of efficient mass-production.⁸¹ Practical, hygienic, comfortable, and cheaply mass produced, his suit is expedient (*tselesoobraznyi*) in the broader Constructivist sense of that term, because it responds to his particular vision of the material demands of workers' *byt*—a vision that has more in common with the ethnographic account of a primitive *byt* than with optimistic NEP advertisements touting a modern, urban lifestyle.

Despite Tatlin's earnestness in his photographs, his solidarity with workers and their primitive *byt* only goes so far, of course; unlike the literally anonymous workers depicted in ethnographic photographs, he enters self-consciously into the ethnographic construction of *byt* as an author. His modest, self-effacing modeling of his suit is also belied by the unusual choice of pinning the pattern pieces above and around his head in an elongated halo, creating a theatrical effect; it would have made more sense to pin the pieces next to each other in an arrangement that would mimic the garment itself. He could even be faulted for a certain arrogance in refusing to work within the parameters of the current production of Leningradodezhda, completely ignoring the tastes in clothing of most of the buying public. Although the jacket of Tatlin's suit may look fairly normal to viewers accustomed to clothes from the later twentieth century, when men's casual jackets inspired by various kinds of workers' uniforms—and even, briefly, by Maoist jackets—became popular, in 1924 his suit would have looked peculiar and futuristic to workers from the Baltiiskii Shipbuilding Factory shopping for leisure clothes, or for that matter to anyone but the most dedicated Communist-Futurist.



FIGURES 2.14, 2.15

K. Kubesh, documentary photo of workers in production clothing, front and back views, Baltiiskii Shipbuilding Factory, Leningrad, 1924
 courtesy Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg.

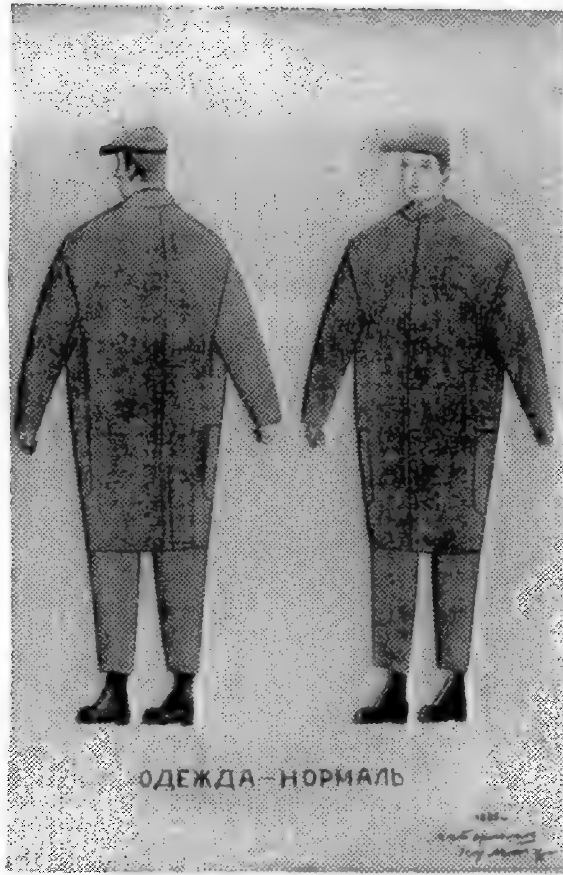


FIGURE 2.16

Vladimir Tatlin, design for a man's coat, 1923. Pencil on paper.

The critic Konstantin Mikhlashevskii brought up precisely this problem of the paradoxical arrogance of a famous artist suddenly choosing to work within traditionally anonymous craft production. Indignant that Tatlin presumed to have the necessary competence to enter highly skilled craft industries as an engineer or designer, he ridiculed Tatlin's pencil drawing of a design for a man's coat, exhibited at the Petrograd Artists of All Tendencies exhibition in 1923 (figure 2.16):

Many thousands of craftsmen all over the world have for ages competed to create a coat that would offer maximum expediency. English firms produce coats presenting in this respect the fruits of long practical experience and a high degree of perfection. With one sketch Tatlin, on the other hand, wants to do better and even publicly exhibits drawings that, naturally, are not corroborated by craft skill.⁶¹

The Productivist counterargument would be that although English manufacturing firms may have years of experience, they do not have the artistic inventiveness of the avant-garde artists, and further, that the designs of such firms are dominated by the profit motive rather than a concern for what kinds of coats will most improve everyday life. Yet Tatlin's primitive sketch showing a hulking man with a tiny head and the rote, vacant face of a fashion sketch has little to offer in the way of avant-garde artistic inventiveness. Nor, seemingly, does the conventionally functional design for the coat, which—as the text of the article on “The New Everyday Life” describes the similar overcoat illustrated there—is wide and full-cut through the shoulders and torso to prevent constriction and facilitate the formation of a layer of warm air; narrow toward the bottom to prevent warmth from escaping; and has extralarge arm-holes to allow unhindered movement of the arms and tapered sleeves, again to retain warmth. The most radical component of the otherwise unremarkable drawing is the carefully lettered caption announcing that this is a “clothing-standard” (*odezhda-normal*) for mass production rather than a singular creation. This caption would have located it immediately for contemporary viewers within the avant-garde domain of Productivism.

The ornery Miklashevskii may have a point about the “poorness” of this sketch. It represents one of Tatlin's earliest clothing design efforts, before he had begun to work in earnest with the Leningradodezhda trust and the Institute of Decorative Arts. Perhaps Tatlin was jumping the gun by displaying this sketch, in order to announce publicly, in an artistic context, his new commitment to making the most basic objects for everyday life. His later linen sportswear suit was a more complex achievement, uniting technical innovation with his own visual experience from his reliefs; we recall that he had directly articulated this working method in a report on the Section for Material Culture, when he stated that he wanted to “use the accumulated experience on material culture (relief and counter-relief), and apply these experiments to the organization of everyday life.” But the criticism that Tatlin's project received, and its failure to enter mass production, stemmed more broadly from the sheer cultural illogicality, in the Russian tradition, of this attempt to “apply” his artistic experiments to *byt*. His art itself was highly valued, but for critics like Efros, Pel'she, and Miklashevskii, the spiritual or intellectual value of his artistic experiments could only be lost when they entered into the material domain of primitive everyday life. Miklashevskii considered Tatlin to be the most talented of the Constructivists, but argued that Tatlin's foray into clothing design “wasted” his great talent. He notes with respect that Tatlin “knows how to install electric lights and doorbells in apartments,



FIGURE 2.17
Vladimir Tatlin, design for a multipurpose metal pot, 1923. Pencil on paper.

how to put together stoves and (as he himself noted . . .) how deftly to tie sailors' knots."⁸³ An artist who worked as a sailor as a young man, voyaging on sailing ships across the Mediterranean, cuts a romantic figure, especially when his skill at tying sailors' knots shows up again in the taut mounting of his ambitious sculptural *Corner Counter-Reliefs*. Yet when Tatlin recalls the windbreaker and angler's cap that he used to wear as a sailor in his designs for practical winter coats and caps, the romantic narrative falters.⁸⁴ His art objects are superior to those of any other artist, according to Miklashevskii, but his misbegotten everyday objects are inferior to those of the average tailor, stove-maker, or tinker.

Perhaps the everyday object with the greatest pathos is Tatlin's failed design for a multipurpose metal pot of 1923 (figure 2.17). Its failure seems more significant because, unlike the ponderous sketch for the conventional overcoat, this sketch of a pot ambitiously attempts to "apply" his experience from the reliefs to an innovative object. The level of ambition seems incommensurate with the extreme modesty of the object itself, which takes its place in Pel'she's dismissive list of the lowly pots, spoons, and buckets favored by the *Lefists*. The sketch is unfinished, seemingly abandoned when Tatlin couldn't get the parts to assemble right; he was trying for a combination cooking pot and teapot with a lid that would double as a frying pan, but he seems to have run into a problem with the mechanism for getting the long handle of the pan to stay put along the side of the pot. The pot's logic of space-saving and multifunctionality attempts to respond to the material privations of primitive Russian *byt*. But it also calls to mind, however faintly and hauntedly, his *Corner Counter-Relief* of 1915 (see figure 2.6)—in its projected material of metal, its mechanisms of spring tension and balance, the jutting shapes of the lip and handle of the pot, and, especially, the diagonally erect handle of the frying pan, which echoes, these many years later, the bold upward thrust of the relief's central, vertical slice of aluminum sheeting. The abandoned sketch with its shadowy doubled forms—the result of the paper being folded over and the graphite rubbing off on the other side of the paper—is like a ghost of the dramatic visual form of the counter-relief.

Tatlin's attempt to use his experience with visual form to make an everyday object is, in this instance at least, defeated by the volition of primitive material *byt*. The defeat is not just mechanical, in the difficulty of designing an object that through sheer ingenuity could solve the problems of overcrowded kitchens and material poverty, but philosophical, in the cultural impossibility of the jump from advanced sculpture to the pots and pans that represent the lowliest women's work of *byt*. In its failure, the sketch for the multipurpose pot points to the difficulty of

the Constructivist reworking of *tselesoobraznost'* from a term meaning pure expediency or functionalism to one encompassing a more social understanding of the goal to be met by a particular form.

The Return of the Eye

The photomontage incorporating the "New Everyday Life" article of 1924-1925 (see figure 2.3) can be read as a rejoinder to the earlier, failed sketch of the multipurpose metal pot. Where the sketch is tentative and ghostly, the photomontage offers a bold, graphic composition in the lower half. The narrow vertical photograph of Tatlin modeling his sportswear suit, cut out from the photomontage in which he is surrounded by the pattern pieces (see figure 2.11), is pasted above the horizontal images of gentlemen in fashionable suits in such a way that Tatlin blocks out only the middle of their legs, leaving the details of their jackets and faces visible. To the left of Tatlin, arranged horizontally in a row, are the four pattern pieces that had surrounded him in the sportswear suit photomontage. They have been recombined to form a rectangular block with a red background that is answered, on the right side of the composition, by a thick black graphic line in the shape of a horizontal combined with a half circle. The horizontal block of pattern pieces on the left and the vertical photograph of Tatlin in his suit in fact combine to form a vivid symbolic image: a hammer. This explains why the photograph of Tatlin has been cut out from the larger original in such a way that the top of it forms a curved arch, to mimic the rounded portion of a hammer. It also explains the presence of the strange, truncated black graphic line on the right: it forms an abstract sickle, with curved blade and straight handle. Tatlin has created a subtle version of the ubiquitous Soviet symbol of the hammer and sickle. In this highly visual object, Tatlin and his everyday material objects become a hammer with which to strike the NEPmen in their fancy suits. Tatlin's visual form elevates itself above, and overcomes by force, the everyday life of NEP.

The metaphor of the hammer as an instrument to smash the old material life, in the Russian tradition of transcending *byt* to achieve a higher *bytie*, had appeared in Nikolai Punin's 1920 essay on Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. Punin framed his critical support for the monument around the claim that it should be understood not as an extension of Tatlin's earlier experiments with material in his reliefs, but rather as a triumphant overcoming of material through artistic form. Punin places particular significance on the temporal form of the spiral, in upward movement from the weight of the past toward the unfettered socialist future:

"The form wants to overcome material and the force of gravity; the force of resistance is great and massive; flexing its muscles, the form searches for the way out along the most resilient and dynamic lines that the world knows—spirals. They are full of movement, striving, speed and they are as taut as creative will and an arm-muscle strained with holding a hammer."⁸⁵ Punin expresses the visual force of the spiral through the stock Bolshevik image of the muscular proletarian holding a hammer, visualizing the overcoming of material as the literal smashing of matter. The language of art criticism here allies itself with the traditional Russian dualism of *byt* and *bytie*: the artistic form of the spiral, representing the path to a higher *bytie*, provides a "way out" from primitive material *byt*. The antiprostitution propaganda poster showing the hammer-wielding proletarian might almost serve as an illustration for Punin's imagery: massive, larger than life, saviorlike in his white garb, striving and flexed, the worker smashes through the material detritus of *byt* during NEP to elevate the woman worker by saving her from prostitution (see figure 2.8).

Tatlin's photomontage pitting the old against the new also contains the same pictorial elements as the antiprostitution poster. Like the worker in the poster, Tatlin wears a plain, light-colored outfit that is oddly anachronistic, with black boots; he is elevated above the other pictorial elements; he is pictorially associated with a hammer; and he tramples hapless capitalists wearing suits and hats. Tatlin sets himself up as the savior who will rain blows down upon the old *byt* from above, rather than participate in it from within. The composition specifically changes the scene of Tatlin's work in *byt* from the primitive, feminine domain of the kitchen with its pots and dishes, represented above by the photograph of the stove, to the modern and, in this case, masculine domain of *meshchanskii* consumerism. Entering *byt* to "battle" *meshchanstvo* was a far more acceptable avant-garde activity—as we saw, for example, in Tret'iakov's essay on Futurism—than entering the kitchen with a well-designed pot. Setting up this particular image of "battle" in the lower half of the photomontage also subtly shifts the meaning of the illustrations for the "New Everyday Life" article that are pasted onto the upper right half of the image: it pulls the two photographs there of Tatlin into alliance with the active image of the hammer beating the bourgeois gentlemen, and away from the passive connotations of *byt* that would be associated, at first glance, with the stove. The photomontage violently reasserts the authorial presence that had been largely repressed from the visual form of the everyday objects, and marks the vivid return of the "eye" to the "touch" of Tatlin's work in the Section for Material Culture.

Throughout the project, even though the everyday objects did not visually evince a particular Tatlin style, he connected them to his artistic identity through their public presentation. He placed two photographs of himself around the photograph of the stove in the "New Everyday Life" article. The clothing designs were always modeled by Tatlin himself. All of the prototype clothing was cut to his own measurements; only one drawing of a woman's dress survives, and it was never produced as a prototype.⁸⁶ This emphasis on the image of his own body, its size and shape as well as its visual presence in almost every public presentation of the objects, connected him to them and compensated for the repression in them of most manifestations of individual artistic form. His need for control over his working process further suggests his intense relation to the objects. According to Zhadova, he exerted complete control over information about the work of the Section: "Tatlin, known for his suspiciousness and his morbid fear of plagiarism, allowed neither employees of other sections nor representatives of the administration onto the premises of the Section for Material Culture—including the director himself, Malevich, a long-standing rival and competitor to Tatlin."⁸⁷

Tatlin revealed a similar desire to impose his individual identity onto the work process, if not the works themselves, in a lecture he gave in 1923 entitled "Down with Tatlinism" (*Doloi Tatlinizm*)—a title that in itself asserts the existence of an entire new "ism" named after himself, even as he purports to criticize it. In the lecture, Tatlin complained that despite his best efforts to enter production, his requests to work in factories were routinely misunderstood or denied by factory authorities. From the audience, Miklashevskii asked him if there was one kind of production that he was particularly interested in working in, and Tatlin responded that "he would need a motorcycle and the right to travel to at least fifteen factories, in order at each one of them to produce the things he needed."⁸⁸ On the one hand, Tatlin claims to be a modest worker within collective Soviet production, Miklashevskii points out, but on the other, he acts as if he is a "chosen one" who can contribute to any area of industry, even outside his area of specialty. Miklashevskii continues indignantly: "he's convinced that, dilettante of technology though he is, it will cost him nothing to make new technological things, he has only to get the desire for it and then ride around on a motorcycle from one factory to the next." It is this motorcycle-riding "chosen one" whose technological things will singlehandedly destroy the old *byt* who makes his appearance in the form of Tatlin-as-hammer in the photomontage.

Yet there is another, more modest image of a worker holding a hammer that this Tatlin might also recall: the worker from the Baltiiskii Shipbuilding Factory modeling his overalls in the front and back ethnographic photographs, whose hammer is not a symbolic attribute but an instrument of his labor in the factory (see figures 2.14, 2.15). Tatlin's photomontage may stage an eruption of the authorial agency that had been repressed in his collective work in the Section for Material Culture, but it remains fundamentally faithful to that project's goal of "research into material as a shaping principle of culture." The content of the hammer, after all, is the sportswear suit, one of the Tatlin's material objects that would meet the demands of "our simple and primitive *byt*" and bring about a socialist *novyi byt*. Rather than the hammer smashing matter and transcending material *byt*, in the spirit of Trotsky, Tret'iakov, Punin, and the entire Russian philosophical tradition, Tatlin proposes to use his own, improved form of a material object of the *novyi byt* to work against the *meshchanskii byt* of NEP, in the spirit of Arvatov and the socialist object. His sportswear suit becomes an "instrument" of "everyday-life-creation," not in the sense of an instrumentalized object that is purely functional, but in the sense evoked by Arvatov when he writes that under socialism, the thing will function "as an instrument and as a co-worker" (EL, p. 124). Tatlin demonstrates his emotional investment in his suit as a comrade-object in the tender praise he scrawls next to it, in contrast to the petulant words that he writes about the NEP suits and the men who value them merely for being "beautiful." Tatlin refuses to concede to the commodity desires of modernity. Instead, he imagines that his active socialist objects can organize a modern form of everyday life that will be free of such desires.